

Death of a Delft Blue

Gladys Mitchell



Death of a Delft Blue

Gladys Mitchell

DAME BRADLEY 37
1964

cover



A 3S digital back-up edition 1.0
[click for scan notes and proofing history](#)

Contents

[PREAMBLE](#)

[CHAPTER ONE: A CONFERENCE ENDS](#)

[CHAPTER TWO: A DINNER IN AMSTERDAM](#)

[CHAPTER THREE: SCOTTISH AIR ON A BARREL-ORGAN](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR: MAASTRICHT AND VALKENBURG](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE: A DINNER IN NORTH NORFOLK](#)

[CHAPTER SIX: AFTERMATH OF A DINNER PARTY](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN: DISAPPEARANCE OF AN HEIR](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCERN ABOUT THE DISPOSSESSED](#)

[CHAPTER NINE: SPECULATION ABOUT A TROGLODYTE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN: MAASTRICHT AND VALKENBURG REVISITED](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN: LAURA THE SLEUTH](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE: TOWARDS KINDERSROUT](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN: ELDON HOLE](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN: NO STONE UNTURNED](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN: GAVIN REPORTS](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN: A DELFT BLUE AT BAY](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: DINNER WITH BERNARDO](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: THE SHE-BEAR DEFENDS HER GRAND-CUB](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN: ANALYSIS OF THREE REACTIONS](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY: NORTH NORFOLK AGAIN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: PURSUIT OF A DELFT BLUE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: DEATH OF A DELFT BLUE](#)

DEATH OF A DELFT BLUE

Death of a Delft Blue revolves around three interrelated families, the Colwyn-Welch family who are English-Dutch, the van Zestiens, who are Dutch-Danish and the family called Rose. Binnen Colwyn-Welch obtains her quite considerable income from her Dutch father's bulb-fields. She lives in Amsterdam with her two unmarried daughters, and it is to Amsterdam that Florian Colwyn-Welch goes to sit to a sculptor and to have a painting made of his right hand holding a Delft Blue hyacinth. From this sitting he does not return.

The motive for his murder is unusual, but for the murderer it is overriding and would have been perfectly comprehensible to James Elroy Flecker. It was also comprehensible to Dame Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley: and though her secretary, Laura Gavin, reached the same solution, she did so not by logic, but by chance and a tune played on a barrel-organ.

By the same author

DEAD MAN'S MORRIS
COME AWAY DEATH
ST PETER'S FINGER
PRINTER'S ERROR
BRAZEN TONGUES
HANGMAN'S CURFEW
WHEN LAST I DIED
LAURELS ARE POISON
THE WORSTED VIPER
SUNSET OVER SOHO
MY FATHER SLEEPS
THE RISING OF THE MOON
HERE COMES A CHOPPER
DEATH AND THE MAIDEN
THE DANCING DRUIDS
TOM BROWN'S BODY
GROANING SPINNEY
THE DEVIL'S ELBOW
THE ECHOING STRANGERS
MERLIN'S FURLONG
FAINTLY SPEAKING
WATSON'S CHOICE
TWELVE HORSES AND THE
HANGMAN'S NOOSE
THE TWENTY-THIRD MAN
SPOTTED HEMLOCK
THE MAN WHO GREW TOMATOES
SAY IT WITH FLOWERS
THE NODDING CANARIES
MY BONES WILL KEEP
ADDERS ON THE HEATH

FIRST PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA 1965 BY
LONDON HOUSE & MAXWELL

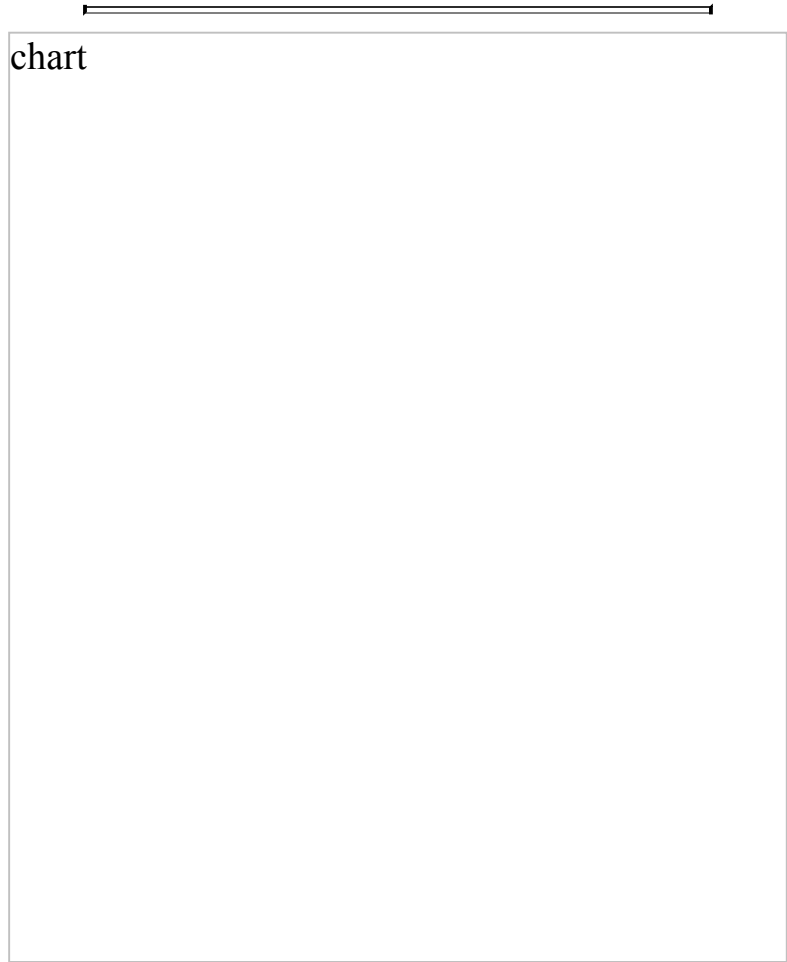
A DIVISION OF THE BRITISH BOOK CENTRE, INC. 122 EAST 55TH
STREET, NEW YORK 22, NEW YORK

Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 65-17413

© copyright 1964 by Gladys Mitchell

*Set and printed in Great Britain by Tonbridge Printers Ltd, Peach Hall
Works, Tonbridge, Kent, in Times ten on eleven point, on paper made by Henry
Bruce at Currie, Midlothian, and bound by James Burn at Esher, Surrey*

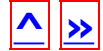
To
Marjorie K. Avery, O.B.E.
and
Marjorie Beer,
who were kind enough to provide me with the Netherlands setting for this
book



Preamble

‘A Fortnight in Holland.’

Title of a book by Leslie Bransby



According to the guide books, Scheveningen, on the Netherlands side of the North Sea, has developed over the centuries from a mere fishing-village to a popular resort. It boasts excellent hotels, fine beaches, possesses every facility for boating and bathing and can offer all the other forms of amusement which a holiday-maker is likely to require.

Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley and her secretary, Laura Gavin, preferred to stay in it rather than in the neighbouring, more dignified but less frivolous city of The Hague, so each morning Dame Beatrice, who was in Holland to attend what her secretary described as ‘a gathering of the vultures’ — in other words, a general conference on higher education — armed herself with her notebooks, her lecture notes, some typed pages of what Laura termed ‘irrelevant answers to improbable questions’ and betook herself to Noordeinde and the historic house in which the conference was to be held. This left Laura in Scheveningen to amuse herself as she pleased for most of the day.

Laura lounged and swam, visited the Municipal Museum and strolled several times along the two-mile esplanade called the *Boulevard* and also along its higher promenade, the *Zeekant*. Every afternoon, upon the return of Dame Beatrice, she and her employer took a short walk before returning to their hotel for dinner, and, at table, exchanged the news of the day, Dame Beatrice giving witty, although not unkindly, reports of her fellow-delegates and Laura responding with an account of her own activities.

One morning, after having seen Dame Beatrice off, Laura decided to explore the old part of the town which lay behind the harbour. There were picturesque houses in narrow streets and the harbour itself was a fine and interesting sight, with dozens of vessels, mostly fishing-boats, all moored in neat lines with clear channels between them. It was early in the day, but there were crowds of people on the waterfront, including the usual bevy of Dutch cyclists, and Laura was standing gazing at the scene and enjoying the noise and bustle on the quay, when

a girl of about nineteen or twenty approached her.

‘I say, do excuse me for asking, but are you English?’ the girl enquired.

‘Well, actually, I’m a Scot,’ Laura replied. ‘Why? Anything I can do?’

‘It’s about the money, if you don’t mind.’

‘Oh?’ said Laura, whose bump of caution was not highly developed but who had an instinctive objection to being accosted by perfect strangers if financial transactions were to be involved.

‘It’s about the Dutch coinage,’ the girl explained. ‘You see, I rather want to take a few presents back with me, but I haven’t unlimited cash, so I want to lay it out to the best advantage, and I just don’t really understand what the Dutch notes and coins are worth.’

‘Oh, well, it’s simple enough if you take the Dutch guilder as being worth about two shillings in our money.’

‘Yes, I know about the guilder, but they seem to have frightful coins called *rijksdaalder* and *kwartje* and *dubbetje* and *stuiver*. Grandma won’t help me and Bernardo only laughs. He’s half-Jewish, you see, and understands about the exchange, and all that sort of thing.’

‘Well, the *rijksdaalder* is worth about five shillings. The *kwartje* is about sixpence, the *dubbetje* is roughly twopence-halfpenny and the *stuiver* is equal to a little over a penny. Its value is five cents, and there are a hundred cents to the guilder. Think in terms of cents and guilders, and you can’t go wrong,’ said Laura briskly.

‘Oh, thank you so much. I’ve only been over here for a few days, you see, and I was getting into awful muddles, always paying in bank notes, of which there seem to be dozens of different ones, and never knowing whether the change was right.’

‘I don’t think one need worry about the right change in Holland. I’ve never been done down since I’ve been here. The bank notes are for a thousand guilders downwards, and are perfectly easy to understand.’ With this, Laura nodded and was about to walk on, when the girl said eagerly,

‘And about the presents. Will the English customs be very grabbing?’

‘I shouldn’t think so. Show them what you’ve got is my advice. I don’t believe in trying to dodge them. I should think it must be so wearing to the nerves. Apart from that, my husband is a policeman and I have to guard his reputation.’

This time Laura really did walk on, and went back to the hotel for a second breakfast.

CHAPTER ONE

A Conference Ends

The country which we call “Holland” is, in reality,
The Netherlands, and the people we call “Dutch” are, in
reality, Netherlands.’

Bernard Pingaud, trans. Harold Myers



At the end of a fortnight, the Scheveningen Conference was over. The experts in higher education laughed, clattered and nattered — the last in a dozen different languages. They gathered up papers and pens, surged around their Dutch hosts and, (but for the melancholy fact that there was nothing to drink except the water in an austere carafe on the chairman’s table), they managed to produce the kind of cacophony usually associated with cocktail parties.

The chairman disentangled himself from an enthusiastic group and went over to where the distinguished alienist, Dame Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley, was the centre of a no less enthusiastic but a very much quieter circle. She was regaling them (by request) with details of some of the more bizarre and interesting deaths by murder and suicide which had fallen within her wide experience.

‘Extraordinary,’ thought the Dutchman, ‘how that mouth, so like the beak of a little bird, can produce those exquisite sounds.’ He paused on the outer fringe of the group to listen to these sounds before he muscled in and cut Dame Beatrice off from her circle of admirers.

‘Ah, Dame Beatrice,’ he said, ‘I am now giving a small luncheon party in the English manner. May I hope that you will join us? There will be just twenty people or so — the amusing ones, of course. I would like you to meet Professor van Zestien and his brother. They were so interested in your paper on *Traumatic Regicides With Special Reference to the Death of Charles I*. Professor Derde van Zestien has made a special study of the period, your English Puritans having points of interest for all Netherlands, of course.’

‘Ah, yes. The Pilgrim Fathers came originally from this country.’

‘From Rotterdam. You should visit that city. There is much that is of interest. And do persuade Professor Sweyn van Zestien to describe to you Amsterdam. If you go there, be sure to look for the street organs, the barrel-organs, you know. They are a particular feature. He is sure to mention them. He admires them very much and is an authority upon their manufacture.’

Still chatting, he led her away, and it was not until some three hours later that she rejoined her secretary in the lounge of their hotel.

‘Did you talk Higher Thought all the time?’ asked Laura.

‘Talking shop was outlawed, politely but firmly, by Professor Derde van Zestien,’ Dame Beatrice replied. ‘I was seated between him and his brother at table and he told me of some of the places of interest which we ought to visit before we return to England.’

‘We?’

‘Well, as your dear Robert seems to be fully occupied with that tiresome Curlew murder, and your son Hamish is away at school, I had hoped that you would see your way to remaining here with me while I go on this promised tour. After all, sightseeing counts for nothing unless one is in a position to point out the obvious to one’s long-suffering travelling companion.’

‘There’s bound to be a lot of stuff that needs attention at your London clinic, you know. Oughtn’t I...?’

‘Nonsense! Dr Anderson will cope. I will tell him to employ a temporary secretary.’

‘Oh, well, naturally, I’d love to stay here, especially if there’s nothing to stop us from gallivanting. We do propose to gallivant, I take it? — not *all* museums and art-galleries?’

‘We will Venice in Amsterdam, even if we also *rijsttafel* at the Bali restaurant there. We will cheese at Alkmaar. We will flower-market at Aalsmeer, seaside at Zandvoort and national costume at Bunschoten-Spakenburg or Staphorst. We will sheep and bird-watch on Texel, and you may swim there. We will yacht at Sneek, spice-bread at Deventer, labyrinth at Maastricht and walk, grotto, miniature-golf (and anything else you like) at Valkenburg.’

‘I didn’t say I didn’t want *any* museums and art-galleries.’

‘Very well. There are sixteen Rembrandts in the Mauritshuis at The Hague, and Delft and Leiden are museums in themselves, so we will visit all.’

‘You seem to know an awful lot about Holland.’

‘No, no, very little, in point of fact, and most of what I do know I gained at

lunch-time from Professor Sweyn van Zestien, Professor Derde's younger brother.'

'Sweyn isn't a Dutch name, is it?'

'No. The professors had a Danish mother. I received much information about the van Zestien family tree from both the brothers. At present there are three branches, one might say. The Colwyn-Welches were fathered by Francis of that ilk, who married into the van Zestien family represented by the professors' Aunt Binnen. She has three children, Opal, Ruby and Frank. After her husband's death, and after the war, during which she served with the Resistance, Binnen returned to the family home in Amsterdam, where she lives with her two unmarried daughters.'

'So that's why Professor Sweyn is so interested in Amsterdam? — they are natives there.'

'It seems so. The son, Frank, married a Scotswoman, Flora Beith, and lives in Scotland, where they own three hotels.'

'Up with the bonnets of Bonnie Dundee!'

'They have two children, Florian and Binnie, aged twenty-three and nineteen respectively. These, however, no longer live at home, but with their granduncle, Bernard van Zestien, father of Derde and Sweyn, and brother to Binnen.'

'Couldn't they thole home life in Caledonia stem and wild?'

'I gathered, but only by putting some apparently unrelated scraps of information together (and most probably, in the process, making an error of one, or even minus one, in the simple addition sum of two plus two), that their parents had an eye to their future.'

'Granduncle stinks of money, I suppose.'

'Not only that, but he has lost the companionship of his sons, Derde and Sweyn, who prefer to live over here and who hold professorships in the Universities, respectively, of Groningen and Amsterdam.'

'Oh, the children and he don't live in Holland, then?'

'No. The granduncle is a diamond merchant, with contacts, of course, in his native city, but it seems he has a house in North Norfolk and an office in Hatton Garden. I gather that he has an extensive fortune, as you suggest.'

'Which, obviously, somebody will inherit.'

'Exactly. He was a lonely man when his Danish wife, Ingeborg, died and his sons and daughter left home. The daughter's name is Maarte and she married a wealthy Jew named Sigismund Rose. They have one son, Bernardo, named after his grandfather.'

‘For obvious reasons, no doubt.’

‘Cynicism run riot, dear Laura!’

‘Don’t you believe it! *I* know the way of the world. I say, though, the family’s a bit of a mixed bag, isn’t it? Dutch, Jewish, Danish, Scottish and with even English (or, possibly, Welsh) ingredients! Which do the professors seem to favour — their Dutch or their Danish forbears?’

‘It is impossible to say. They are cosmopolitans. Moreover, not only do they muster seven European languages between them, but Derde is an authority on the Aztecs of Mexico and Sweyn’s special subject is the rune-stones of Denmark.’

‘Rune-stones? Mostly magic! I’d like to meet him.’

‘Why, so you shall. We are bidden to dine with the van Zestiens in Amsterdam. It is to be a family party, I understand. Grandmother Binnen, her daughters, her grandchildren, Florian and Binnie, her great-nephew Bernardo all will be there.’

‘At the ancestral home?’

‘No. The celebration is to be held in a private room at an hotel in Nieuwe Doelenstraat.’

‘But do they really want me? After all,’ argued Laura, with unwonted modesty, ‘I’m only your general dogsbody and humble telephone operator.’

‘In return for their family history, complete with family tree, sketched (I regret to say) upon a hitherto unblemished tablecloth by Professor Sweyn, I returned their civility by recounting a short and, I trust, pithy account of my own circumstances and environment. They were charmed with my picture of you and your Amazonian exploits, and are determined to have speech with you.’

‘I see. Weren’t you brought up to tell the truth and not to embroider merely in order to disguise the poor quality of the material you were working on? Anyway, when do we attend this binge?’

‘The festivities are planned for the day after tomorrow. At my request — for the hotels are full at this time of year — Sweyn has obtained rooms for us at an hotel in which his father holds shares (for diamonds are not Mr Bernard’s only source of wealth), and therefore we shall be able to take in something of the city tomorrow and on the following morning. In the evening Professor Sweyn will collect us from our hotel and transport us to the one in which they have chosen to entertain us.’

‘Fine! I can’t wait to meet your two professors and their Aunt Binnen. What’s her name mean, by the way? I don’t really know any Dutch, but

somehow that word seems to ring a bell.'

'*Binnen* means *Come In*,' said Dame Beatrice, solemnly.

'Blimey!' commented Laura. 'What with that, and daughters named Opal and Ruby—! Why not have called the son Diamond, while they were about it?'

'Possibly because the daughters' names were bestowed fortuitously. Their father, if you remember, was English and there is no reason, so far as my information goes, to connect him with Hatton Garden. Did you have a good lunch?'

'Yes. I could now do with some exercise. What do you say to a stroll to Wesbroek Park to take a look at that miniature town they've built there, and then perhaps a round of miniature golf by the Grand Hotel in Gevers Diejnootweg?'

'Both projects appear suited to my advanced years and physical frailty.'

'Right, then. Let's go.'

The walk along the promenade was pleasant, although a fresh breeze was blowing inland from the North Sea. Stone breakwaters in the form of jetties took the force of the sea itself and protected a firm sandy beach along which Laura, while the Conference was on, had walked for miles to the north and from which, at least twice a day, she had swum. There were dunes behind the beach proper, but these were fenced in, except for occasional narrow paths which accommodated walkers and the ubiquitous cyclist. The fencing was to protect the grasses whose roots held down the light and shifting sand.

Dame Beatrice and Laura walked as far north as the turning to Zwolse Straat and then, at Dame Beatrice's suggestion, they turned about and went as far as Keiser Straat before returning to Gevers Diejnootweg and the Grand Hotel for their game of miniature golf. It was the only game, except for chess and croquet, at which Dame Beatrice could always beat Laura. This gave great satisfaction to both.

They had just concluded a round of the miniature golf when a young fresh voice hailed Laura.

'I say! This *is* fun! It's *you* again!' it cried. Laura and Dame Beatrice waited politely for the girl to join them. She was, of course, Laura's pupil in the lesson on the Anglo-Dutch rate of exchange.

'Hullo,' said Laura, with little warmth of tone. 'Lovely day, isn't it? We've just finished playing miniature golf.'

'Oh, that's what I thought *I* would do. I suppose... it isn't much fun going round on one's own...'

Laura and Dame Beatrice exchanged glances. Laura raised her eyebrows,

indicating her willingness to accede to the unspoken request. Dame Beatrice nodded and (most mendaciously) said that she would be very glad of a rest before returning to the hotel. She would hire a beach-chair, she added, and Laura could come and find her when they had finished their game.

‘How went the purchases?’ asked Laura of the girl, when Dame Beatrice had left them. ‘Any luck?’

‘Oh, yes, but the things seem awfully expensive here. I wondered, after I’d bought them, whether I wouldn’t have done better to wait until we went to Amsterdam. Still, I had to get something for Gran and the aunts, who *live* in Amsterdam, and I suppose they’d much rather have things that came from somewhere else.’

‘If they live in Amsterdam, why on earth didn’t you bring them something from England?’ Laura enquired. ‘I should have thought it was the obvious thing.’

‘You don’t know Gran. She loathes everything English since our English grandfather died of flu in London. I believe she even loathes my brother and me quite a bit, simply because we live in England instead of over here. She grows bulbs — tulips, hyacinths, daffodils — and she’s always talking about Admiral van Tromp and things like that.’

‘Oh, yes, the Dutch carrying-trade and our rather dog-in-the-manger attitude regarding it. Well, I can’t say I blame her,’ observed Laura.

‘Anyway, I bought her a bit of Delft china and the aunts a tiny silver pin-tray each,’ said the girl. ‘I don’t know *what* to take home for Granduncle. He’s got *everything*. I shall have to take him some Dutch cigars, but, of course, he can get those in England. Mamma and Papa will just have to go on hoping. I can’t possibly afford anything for them this time.’

‘Oh, well, then,’ said Laura cheerfully, ‘you’ll have only your granduncle’s present to pay Customs duty on, won’t you? I don’t think we need toss for innings. You drive off, and may the best man win.’

‘I say, I do like you,’ said the girl, touching Laura’s arm.

‘Oh, so do lots of people,’ said Laura, irritably. ‘Let’s get on with it, shall we?’

‘I’m afraid I’ve bothered you. I’m sorry.’

Laura felt that she had been piggish, and they finished the game in silence and then went to find Dame Beatrice.

‘I’m sorry to have taken your daughter away from you,’ said the girl, with apparent contrition and sincerity.

‘You flatter me,’ responded Dame Beatrice. ‘Laura is not related to me, but,

if she were, she would be my granddaughter, not my daughter. There would be a generation between.'

'Sez you!' said Laura. 'Well, we'd better be going,' she added to the girl. 'Goodbye, and thanks for the game.'

'I'm afraid I've wasted your time,' said the girl. 'I'd counted on my brother, but he decided to go to Amsterdam a day early, and my uncles have gone there, too. They are planning a ghastly dinner-party. They're giving it for some awful people they met at a Hague conference. Florian — that's my brother — wants to do the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and then tour the red light quarter. He wouldn't let me go with him. I suppose I can see his point, although I'm quite as much of a sociologist as he is, if it comes to that. Anyway, that's why I'm on my own this afternoon.'

'And the other morning?' Laura could not forbear to ask. 'You know... when we met on the quay.'

'Oh, Florian never gets up before ten. He never has breakfast, you see. And the Uncles van Zestien were away at that silly Conference I mentioned.'

'I see. Well, to save embarrassment later, perhaps I'd better tell you,' said Laura, 'that *we* are the awful people for whom the Professors van Zestien are giving the ghastly dinner-party. I take it that you will be present, so we'll just say *au revoir* and toddle along.' She grinned, and patted the stricken girl kindly on the shoulder. 'Don't weaken,' she added. 'All's forgiven and forgotten, to coin a phrase.'

CHAPTER TWO

A Dinner in Amsterdam

‘... there was sharp stylistic differentiation in the arts and crafts of tribes whose broad culture pattern was the same.’

G. C. Vaillant



Dame Beatrice and Laura explored Amsterdam first of all by steamer from the Stationsplein. Unlike those of Venice, the Amsterdam canals are bordered, for the most part, by streets. Moreover, they do not form a network so much as a woven pattern of concentric circles, and the same bridge may span four, or even more, of these canals at a time.

Laura and Dame Beatrice had been on the steamer for not more than a few minutes when they heard the sound of a barrel-organ for the first time.

‘Hullo! Pop music,’ said Laura.

‘I have been told,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘that one should by no means neglect to take the opportunity of inspecting one of these anachronisms. They are said to be decorated by figures which behave in a human manner and to be one of the show-pieces of the city. Incidentally, they may furnish us with a subject of conversation at this evening’s festivities.’

‘Any subject to be avoided, by the way? One likes to be forewarned,’ said Laura.

‘So far as the professors are concerned, none at all. Of their relatives’ sensitivities, of course, I cannot speak with any assurance.’

‘One usually has to avoid discussing politics and religion.’

‘They are very much *better* avoided, in my case, as I know little of either, and could not discuss them intelligently, however much I might wish to do so.’

The pleasant jumble of houses slid by. The voice of the professional guide droned on. The white-painted pleasure steamer passed beneath bridge after bridge. The boat was broad, squat, comfortable, and had a glass roof. Time passed. Empty barges, painted coal-black and bearing numbers instead of names,

were drawn up at quays. A large municipal building, half-obscured by trees, had a tower of red brick topped by a silver-grey spire of graceful proportions. A clock at the base of this spire gave the time as half-past twelve. In the distance was another bridge and there were more towers and a gasometer. Opposite the barges, privately-owned motorboats were at moorings. Everything looked remarkably clean.

‘Well,’ said Laura, when the trip was over, ‘where do we go from here?’

‘Back to lunch,’ replied Dame Beatrice firmly. ‘After that, we can see how we feel. For my own part, I am open to any suggestions which you may see fit to offer.’

‘The Rijksmuseum would give us something to talk about, if the barrel-organs pass out on us or we haven’t managed to see one.’

‘The Rijksmuseum? An excellent idea.’

‘On the other hand, there is something to be said for leaving the Dutch immortals in peace,’ said Laura thoughtfully. ‘I don’t somehow feel I can do them justice at the dinner table. All my concentration will be on the food. What about hiring a car and going to Haarlem? From there — I’ve been looking at the map in the hotel vestibule — we could go to Zandvoort. Didn’t you once speak of yachts?’

They spent a pleasant and comparatively lazy afternoon and, in the evening, were conducted to the hotel at which the dinner-party was to be held. They were taken up by Sweyn to the floor on which the private dining-room was situated. With them in the lift were a squarely-built, black-haired, elderly woman and a younger one, fashionably dressed, slim and elegant. The older woman suddenly broke out with impressive vehemence.

‘So why are we mounting to these attics?’ she declaimed rhetorically. ‘Why not a decent room on a decent floor, no?’

‘The best we can do,’ said Sweyn, smiling.

‘I’m sure it will be very nice, mamma. I don’t suppose they let the ground-floor rooms to private parties,’ said the young woman hastily.

‘Nice is nonsense! I am not here to be nice. For relations I have to be *nice*! Phooey!’ She turned her back on Sweyn and, after giving an insolent stare at Dame Beatrice, who had come into her line of vision, she shrugged and sniffed.

The lift stopped at the third floor. Laura and Dame Beatrice got out. The mother and daughter followed them and Sweyn brought up the rear. They were all conducted to a swing door and ushered in. The rest of the company, it seemed, was already gathered in the ante-room in which cocktails were being

served. Soon Dame Beatrice and Laura were pounced upon by Binnie.

‘Oh, hullo,’ she said. ‘I say, here’s a mess! Great-aunt Rebekah Rose, Bernie’s grandmother, has invited herself and Aunt Petra to the dinner. Oh, Lord! Here they are! Nobody’s safe while Great-aunt Rebekah is around. Do have some sherry or something. I hope dinner will come soon. I’m famished, wolfish and starving.’

Dinner was announced, and at the table Laura found herself next to Sweyn van Zestien. He declared that he was delighted.

‘Oh, so am I,’ said Laura. ‘I hear you’re an authority on rune-stones, especially those in Denmark. We’ve got some at home in Britain, but when I was in Sweden last year I was told that in about A.D. 1000 the runes took a new lease of life and the rune-stones became more numerous in Sweden than anywhere else. Would that be so?’

Sweyn embarked upon a long, elaborate and very learned reply. Laura listened attentively, but could not help overhearing a far more enthralling conversation which was going on elsewhere. An old, strident, self-assured voice dominated the milder tones of her relations, who were attempting to apply the soft pedal.

‘So I am paying for an empty pea-shuck, is it? So I am to be cheated by rascally shopkeepers, yes?’ shouted Rebekah Rose.

An exquisite young man, who had been introduced as Bernardo, and who was a Byronic, very handsome fellow, took issue with her.

‘Now, now, Grandmamma! You can’t expect us to swallow that one, you know! You took back an empty pea-shuck? It just sounds silly to me.’

‘Silly?’ screamed his grandmother. ‘So what? Is silly when, in a bar, you are asking for whisky and paying for it, too, and you get an empty glass? That would be silly, isn’t it, when you don’t complain?’

‘It’s not the same thing, Grandmamma, not the same thing at all. An empty pea-shuck, well, that’s only one among many, and can make no possible difference; but an empty whisky-glass is a thing in its own right, don’t you see.’

‘And a whisky-glass is accounting for all these deaths on the road, *hein*? A little ordinary pea-shuck is not doing that, yes? So it has no importance? Stupid boy!’

‘Runic stones in Denmark are to be found mostly in village churchyards,’ pursued Sweyn’s thoughtful, cultured voice. ‘Many of the runes are accompanied by very interesting designs based upon those used in wood-carving. There is a notable example...’

Laura tried to listen to him, but was soon defeated.

‘So I am calling you, Bernardo, an outraged twit!’ screamed Bernardo’s grandmother.

‘Outrageous, *not* outraged! Mind your innuendos, Grandmamma,’ protested the handsome Bernardo. ‘You should go to evening classes and learn English.’

‘So why you are dodging the synagogue?’ his relative demanded hotly, taking the battle on to her own ground.

‘But I’m *not* dodging it, Grandmamma. I just don’t care to go, that’s all. A lot of old men in beards, and all of them wearing their hats! The synagogue doesn’t appeal to me at all, especially on a Saturday. I’d rather play golf with my friends.’

‘Of course, there was Asmund, a professional writer of runic inscriptions, who seems to have lived, (or, more likely, to have worked), somewhere between A.D. 1025 and 1050.’ went on Sweyn, patiently, to Laura. ‘By that time, of course, Christianity had taken over, and we find a rune-stone of the period commemorating a death — the death of a much-loved son. It concludes with the words: ‘God and God’s mother help his soul.’

‘So what was good enough for Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, is not good enough for *you!*’ yelled the Jewish grandmother to Bernardo.

‘But the patriarchs didn’t *go* to the synagogue, Grandmamma dear. There weren’t any synagogues in those days,’ explained Bernardo, amused, but also slightly apprehensive.

‘So you risk to die, like poor little Isaac, for someone’s jealousy, yes?’ demanded Rebekah.

‘At one time,’ pursued Sweyn, ‘the runic alphabet was reduced to sixteen letters. Later, however...’

‘You’re talking through your top-knot, Grandmamma,’ protested Bernardo, his voice rising higher.

‘I am? Then think of this, maybe. Who else but this Hagar is wishing to see this Isaac dead? Yahweh? Phooey! Why *He* should wish to murder a little small boy on the top of a hill? Hagar is pitched out, with child Ishmael, no? Jealousy, envy, hatred, malice, all in Sarah’s heart. *She* made to have Hagar turned away into the desert. I tell you, Abraham was *got at!* Why he should want to have a son by this Sarah, when he has already this beautiful little boy by slave-girl Hagar?’

‘The magical inscriptions,’ went on Sweyn, ‘protected, not only people, but the rune-stones themselves. There is quite a powerful curse put on the

Bjorketorp stone in Norway, for example.'

'But nobody killed Isaac, Grandmamma,' argued Bernardo. 'There was a ram in a thicket, if you remember.'

'I remember good. Why not? He is in my stars, this ram. In April I am born, isn't it? You may give me a little ram in diamonds for a coat-brooch on my birthday, April ninth. You are not forgetting?'

'The Golden Fleece!' muttered Bernardo to Binnie, who giggled wildly and began to choke.

'Runes,' went on Sweyn, his quiet voice now audible in the silence which had followed Rebekah's request, 'were little used from the end of the sixth century until the beginning of the eighth century. England then developed her own alphabet of twenty-eight letters and this was increased in the ninth century to the number of thirty-three.'

'So twenty pieces of money are given for Joseph, sold into Egypt,' said Rebekah, glaring at Bernardo.

'Bulbs,' announced Binnen, from her seat between Bernardo and his grandmother, who had been arguing with one another across her, 'are of more importance than money, in my opinion. Anything which grows is of more value than something which does not grow.'

'Money does grow,' muttered Rebekah.

'Ah, yes, dear aunt,' said Derde, 'do tell Dame Beatrice about the bulb-fields. She tells me she has a very large garden at her country home in Hampshire. I am sure she would be interested.'

'Well, some of us would *not*!' shouted Rebekah. 'Bulbs? Phooey! I spit on bulbs!'

'Oh, for goodness' sake!' groaned Bernardo. 'Be quiet, darling Grandmamma. You're making yourself conspicuous! Look at poor Aunt Petra! She blushes for her mother!'

Petra, beautifully dressed, handsome and slim, grimaced at him from the opposite side of the table. It was difficult to believe that the quiet, well-mannered, sophisticated woman was the dreadful Rebekah's daughter. She must take after her father's side of the family, Dame Beatrice thought. Rebekah, abandoning her war with Bernardo, leaned forward and studied the rings on Dame Beatrice's left hand. She gesticulated.

'The emerald,' she said. 'What you are asking for the emerald?'

Dame Beatrice finished the last morsels of a delicious *rijsttafel*. Then she removed several of her rings and took off the one to which Bernardo's

grandmother had referred. She passed it over to her. The old Jewess dived into her handbag, which she had been prudently clasping underneath the table between her feet, and produced a watchmaker's eye-piece. She screwed this in, picked up the ring, scrutinised it closely and then announced:

‘Flawed. Twenty-five pounds I offer in English money.’

‘It is *not* flawed,’ said Dame Beatrice equably. ‘Moreover, it is not for sale.’

‘The first bulbs,’ said Binnen anxiously, ‘date from about the year 1560. They were experimental and, of course, all were tulips.’

‘There was speculation in bulbs at one time,’ said Derde, nobly backing up his aunt. ‘And, another thing, we used to divide off the bulb-fields by hedges, but these impeded mechanisation and so are disappearing.’

‘Bulbs are to be sold by auction,’ announced the Jewish grandmother, scornfully. ‘No commercial savvy has anybody in bulbs. All are cheated. All auctions are cheat. Somebody runs up and then backs down. *Fake* buying!’

‘But, Grandmamma,’ protested Bernardo, ‘you couldn’t sell all those millions of bulbs any other way than by auction.’

‘I,’ responded his relative, ‘would be having all those silly little bulbs through my fingers.’

‘Like the pea-shucks, eh?’ retorted Bernardo.

‘You know, Aunt Rebekah,’ said Derde, desperately, ‘there is State control of the bulb-fields. All diseased bulbs are weeded out and destroyed. The auctions are perfectly fair, I can assure you.’

‘Mrs Gavin,’ put in Sweyn, ‘has been telling me about the British runestones, particularly in relation to a story which she is prepared to lend me, and which I want very much to read.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Laura, accepting the ball which had been lobbed to her. ‘It’s a story by M. R. James, once Provost of Eton, called *Casting the Runes*. I don’t know that it has much bearing upon the subject,’ she added, ‘because the runes don’t appear to have been, so to speak, the official ones.’

‘One never knows,’ said Sweyn cheerfully. ‘The story has its origin in magical practices, no doubt. The word “runes” means mystery, secret, secrecy.’

‘The festival of flowers is well worth seeing,’ said Binnen. ‘The growers do not need the flowers, only the bulbs. They are glad to have the flowers used in the festival. The floats are miraculous.’

‘So is the Three Arts Ball,’ said the immaculate Jewish daughter, making her voice heard almost for the first time. ‘I like it very much.’

‘Barbarity!’ said her mother. ‘One talks of the morals of ostriches!’

‘Do ostriches have morals, Grandmamma?’ enquired her handsome grandson, in a dangerously interested and solicitous voice.

‘In West Friesland,’ said Binnen, still sounding anxious, ‘are tulips and irises, on a nice, heavy clay soil. Straw and fine peat...’

‘I am telling you Abraham, Isaac, Jacob are living 1900 B.C., Christian date,’ shrieked Rebekah, completely ignoring Binnen, and joining in the conversation between Sweyn and Laura.

‘And I,’ said Sweyn, impassively, ‘am telling, not *you*, dear Aunt Rebekah, but Mrs Gavin, that Jacob slept on a pillar of stone and dreamed of angels. Why not an early type of rune-stone? We know that the runic alphabet was based on a script invented or inherited by a North Etruscan people in the second or first century B.C., and it *could* be...’

‘What is this second or first, cart before horse, century?’ demanded Rebekah, speaking with venom tempered by a kind of unwilling respect. Sweyn patiently informed her that, for instance, 4000 B.C. was long before 1000 B.C.

‘So this dating is all phooey? No?’ was Rebekah’s comment.

‘It is a convenience, that’s all,’ explained Sweyn.

‘When I am needing a convenience, I am going to the ladies’ cloakroom, isn’t it?’ demanded Rebekah.

This unanswerable query provoked an outburst of ‘cover-up’ talk from the rest of the table. Sweyn told Laura loudly that in the thirteenth century a Danish legal document called the *Codex Runicus* had been compiled and that at about the same time a prayer-book had been written in runes for the benefit of a Danish notable of the era who was not conversant with Latin.

Laura responded with a rather vague reference to the Breeches Bible and realised, too late, that she had perpetrated a *gaffe*, but her face was partially saved by Binnen, who, equally unfortunately, took the opportunity to inform all and sundry that in September compost and stable manure were spread on the bulb-fields.

‘For heavens’ sake!’ shouted Binnie’s brother, the blue-eyed Florian, who, up to this point, had conversed little and that only with his Aunt Opal, who, to his apparent fury, had been given him as a dinner-partner and to whom he had been, on the whole, extremely rude. ‘Can’t we get away from ordure?’

‘Yes, we can,’ said Lord Byron, rising from his chair. ‘We can, indeed. I have the honour to inform you all that Binnie and I propose to be married in the near future. We invite you all to the wedding and will let you know the date as soon as possible.’

If Bernardo's idea had been to change the subject, he succeeded admirably. Every woman of his family and connections, with the exception of Binnie, contributed an opinion, a congratulation or, in the case of Grandmother Rebekah, a denunciation.

'You are to marry this C. of E. chit?' she yelled. 'No, not! I have promised you this twenty months to Aaron Lomberg for his daughter Rachel!'

'You should have told me, Grandmamma,' said Bernardo, 'and then *I* would have told *you* that my tastes do not lie in the direction of Rachel Lomberg. She is a nice girl and I shall always regard her with brotherly affection, but...'

'You are marrying for money, you think!' screamed Rebekah. 'Let me tell you that you are *not*! Bernard's money will never go to this little Miss Prim and Proper! If anybody gets it, it will be divided.'

'English as she is spoke by Grandmamma,' muttered Bernardo to Binnie. 'Listen, darling,' he added, addressing his aged relative, 'I have never supposed that any of the van Zestien money would go to little Binnie, but, if I married Rachel Lomberg, none of it would go to me, either. And Aaron Lomberg has six sons, remember. Why do you think my dear mamma insisted on calling me Bernardo? The old man is tickled to death to have a namesake. What says my cousin Florian? Binnie, my dear, let's leave the table and seek romance beside the waters of comfort, otherwise one of the canals of Amsterdam, for they flow more quietly than ever flowed the Don.'

'I'll be glad to,' said Binnie, with her accustomed giggle. There ensued a short silence, broken, as the door closed behind the couple, by noisy whoops of distress and fury from Grandmother Rebekah. Then everybody began to speak, except for Laura. Her attention had been caught by the expression on the face of Binnie's brother Florian when Bernardo had addressed him.

It was a face of remarkable beauty. Florian was fair-haired, fair-skinned and looked incredibly young and pure unless and until he smiled. His smile added years to his appearance, and a devil, instead of an angel, flashed out and his hyacinth-blue eyes became cat-like slits of Satanic wickedness. Laura had never seen such an evil and fascinating change in anybody, for, upon the receipt of Bernardo's announcement of the engagement, Florian had suddenly smiled. Of Bernardo's pointed question with regard to the testamentary depositions of his grandfather, he had taken no notice at all.

'The Aztecs,' said Professor Derde gallantly, 'followed cults common to primitive civilisations everywhere. They were nature worshippers and their religion embraced corn goddesses, the rain god and the Lady of the Turquoise

Skirt. She was the protector and deity of rivers and lakes. Older cults appear to have envisaged the Seven-Snake goddess of crops and corn, but—'

'I am not for these goddesses,' moaned Rebekah, suspending her more spectacular evidences of grief and rage in favour of a milder form of protest. 'Religion belongs to the men.'

Nobody disputed this point, neither was she given time to elaborate upon it, for Dame Beatrice at once remarked that Picasso's preoccupation with bulls was connected less with the *corrida* than with a folk-memory which took him back to the days of the later Roman empire and the Mithraic sacrifices.

The professors leapt upon this red-herring with relief, alacrity and tremendous gusto. Even the so-far almost silent Petra and Binnen's younger daughter Ruby joined in, and so, to Laura's surprise, did Florian, his extraordinary beauty restored, the wolfish smile gone, his strange eyes deeply blue again and as innocent as those of a young child.

'Oh, for a picture or a portrait bust!' said Opal, looking into his face.

'Yes,' said his grandmother Binnen, 'I think Florian must sit for his portrait. Except for snapshots, we have had no picture of him since he was five.'

'His head should be cast in bronze,' said Opal, eagerly.

'In pure gold, you mean,' said Florian, smiling again and with the same evil effect. Rebekah pricked up her ears.

'Who could afford?' she demanded.

'Runes were often inscribed on metal,' said Sweyn, hastily. 'They were incised on the blades of swords. The swords of the Northmen were well adapted for inscriptions, for they were long and fairly broad, and the last phase of the Runic script, being sharply angular, was pre-eminently suitable...'

At this point Rebekah rose from the table and announced that she must go. She, her daughter and Bernardo were catching a plane in the morning back to London. Their departure broke up the party. This, Laura thought, was as well. Runes, bulbs and the Aztecs seemed inexhaustible subjects of conversation. Derde's last reference was to Tlaloc, the rain-god. When, escorted by the professors, Dame Beatrice and Laura reached the street, the rain, as though invoked, was pouring down. Derde appeared to be gratified by this.

'I have known it happen before,' he mildly stated. 'There is more in these ancient religions than some people think.'

CHAPTER THREE

Scottish Air on a Barrel-Organ

‘I’ve heard them lilting at our ewe-milking,
Lasses a’lilting before dawn o’ day;
But now they are moaning on ilka green loaning,
The Flowers of the Forest are a’ wede away.’

Jane Elliot



Well!’ said Laura when she and Dame Beatrice were again in their own hotel. ‘I wonder what it would have been like if ghastly old Rebekah and her daughter hadn’t gatecrashed the party?’

‘But I don’t think they did gate-crash it, child. I think somebody invited them. How else could they have known that the dinner was to take place? They had come from England, remember. Besides, I liked Rebekah. There is always something to be said for those who call a spade a damned shovel.’

‘The daughter didn’t seem to think they would be welcomed, anyhow, and I don’t believe they were. Who would have invited them?’

‘Professor Derde and Professor Sweyn, presumably. It was their party. I should imagine that Rebekah and her daughter came over with Bernardo especially for the dinner.’

‘Lord Byron set the cat among the pigeons with his last announcement, didn’t he? I could hear the bird flapping its wings, especially where young Florian was concerned.’

‘Yes, indeed, if I understand your metaphor aright. What did you make of the professors?’

‘Nice, but dull. Foreigners get very solemn and informative, I always think, don’t you?’

‘The Dutch and the Germans are often clumsy riders when they mount their hobby-horses, but then, so are some of the English. By the way, your reference to the bird flapping its wings makes me wonder whether *any* member of the family (including the two young people themselves) is really happy about Mr

Bernardo's announcement of the engagement.'

'Money comes into it, I suppose. It's going to be a marriage of convenience to keep all the lolly together. If it isn't a vulgar speculation, (although I'm pretty certain it is), I wonder how much the respective grandmothers have to leave? We know Grandmother Colwyn-Welch's money is in bulbs, but we don't know anything about Grandmother Rebekah, beyond the fact that she takes empty peas-shucks back to the greengrocer. I wish I had that sort of nerve.'

'There remains, of course, old Mr Bernard van Zestien. I wonder whether *he* knows of the engagement?'

'Almost bound to, I should think. After all, Binnie is not only his grandniece; she and her brother live with him.'

'Did you form any impression of the brother?'

'Not much of one, except that he's handsome and vulpine. I was pretty well tied up with the rune-stones, you know. What did he have to talk about?'

'Modern painting and modern poetry. He heartily despises both, to the distress of his aunt Opal, who is a devotee, it seems, of the poets who were writing at the beginning of, or during, the 1914 war. According to Florian, however, the only painter of note was Rubens, (he drew a spirited picture of a voluptuous lady on the tablecloth), and the only poets were Spanish ones. He quoted, at some length, from the sixteenth-century poet Garcilaso de la Vega — in Spanish, of course. Opal begged him to translate, but he did not.'

'Loathsome little brute! But I suppose they all like to show off at that age. This sketching on the tablecloth appears to be a bit of a family foible. From Professor Sweyn *I* got the runic alphabet from the second century onwards, and an extremely romantic picture of the Devil all done in a kind of strapwork, as though his limbs and things were long tongues. What about the aunts?'

'Aunt Petra Rose was almost without utterance and ate little, and Aunt Ruby Colwyn-Welch, also almost speechless, obviously preferred the pleasures of the table to the more refined commitments of civilised intercourse. Her sister's remarks I have, to some extent, described.'

'Well and truly under their mother's thumb, from what I saw of them.'

'They live a very secluded life, I imagine. I got Professor Derde to talk about the Aztecs, and, in the family tradition, he sketched on the tablecloth the god Quetzalcoatl in his symbolic form of a feathered snake.'

'Why pick on *him*, I wonder? Quetzalcoatl, I mean.'

'He is the god of learning and of the priesthood.'

'Oh, I see. By the way, how much longer are we staying in Amsterdam?'

‘We still have the Rijksmuseum to visit. Then we can go on to Maastricht and Valkenburg, unless you wish to spend more time at Zandvoort.’

‘No, I’ve had plenty of swimming. If there’s time at the end, I would rather like Delft, though.’

‘Good. We leave Amsterdam, then, the day after tomorrow.’

At breakfast on the following morning a note was brought to Dame Beatrice. She read it and passed it over to Laura.

‘Hired a barrel-organ? And will we walk along the banks of the Herengracht Canal until we reach Wester Kerk and Raadhuis Straat, there to be prepared to listen to a piece of music which will bring nostalgia to Mrs Gavin?’ said Laura, incredulity in her voice. ‘Some assignment! Has it any bearing on last night’s dinner-party, do you suppose?’

‘As it is signed by Binnie, whose engagement may not be to the family’s taste or in its interests, I well think that it might.’

‘An excuse to see *you* again, I should imagine,’ said Laura. ‘And, if I may offer the remark without giving offence, I can’t see the reason for it. Nobody’s been murdered, I take it?’

‘It seems less than likely. Nevertheless, I suggest that we fall in with the young woman’s wishes and...’

‘Make tracks for the Herengracht Canal? Excellent. I should like the opportunity of playing a barrel-organ, especially in public. It will be quite an experience, and something to tell Hamish, who is quite sickeningly toffee-nosed these days since he went into long trousers and learned the small guitar. What do we do? Take a cab and then walk the rest of the way?’

‘I think so. We can drive along the Amstel past the Grand Theatre and as far as the Dam, I hope. Raadhuis Straat is a broad turning near the post-office. When we have finished breakfast, perhaps you can suggest to the hall porter that we should like to hire a vehicle.’

The barrel-organ turned out to be only nominally in the possession of Binnie and her brother. Its owners were jealously guarding it, taking it in turns to supervise the musical renderings and shake the collecting box.

Binnie greeted Dame Beatrice and Laura rapturously. Florian met them with gracefulness but also with some reserve. Both abandoned the barrel-organ to its owners in order to talk to the newcomers.

‘This is marvellous! So glad you could come!’ cried Binnie. ‘We did want Mrs Gavin to hear this particular tune. I’m partly Scottish myself, you see. Bernie hasn’t that advantage, I’m afraid. Oh, but I mustn’t talk about Bernie in

front of Florian. He doesn't like him.'

Florian grunted and dug his heel into a patch of oil in the roadway.

'I wonder why they can't keep the streets clean?' he said. Binnie gave a little scream, and told him that Holland was the cleanest country in Europe, with the exception, perhaps, of Switzerland, although even of that she was not too sure. 'Now, listen!' she added, with dramatic emphasis. 'I know the order of these tunes by heart, and I'm certain Mrs Gavin's one comes after the one they're playing now.'

A lively dance tune came to an end. The man with the collecting box made his rounds among the crowd which the sounds of the street-organ had caused to gather at the corner of Raadhuis Straat. Then Florian returned to the instrument and took over the iron wheel, two feet in diameter, which brought to life the concordance of pipes, drums and cymbals behind the mechanical figures which beat time or affected to play the instruments. These last made up the orchestra hidden behind the carved and painted forefront of the barrel-organ.

It seemed to Laura to be hard and concentrated work to turn the wheel and Florian soon abandoned the effort. Laura was wondering how her own wrists and muscles would stand the strain — since she was anxious to try her strength and skill — when the doleful tune of *The Lament for Flodden* greeted the alien air of the city.

Laura began to hum, reminding herself, as she did so, of Jane Elliot's simple words of mourning for young fellows taken from the lanes and the sheep-folds to fight on the Scottish Border. There was sorrow, too, and pity and understanding for the girls they had left behind them — the girls who would never again hear jesting and be teased, coaxed and wooed; who would never again play hide-and-seek among the haystacks with their bucolic swains.

It was all as anachronistic, in its way, thought Laura, as was Caesar's nightgown — not Elizabethan this time, though, but full of false although charming eighteenth-century sentiment — and yet, as she listened to the tune's dying fall, she was filled with a sense of unease.

*We'll hear nae mair lilting at our ewe-milking;
Women and bairns are heartless and wae;
Sighing and moaning on ilka green loaning—
The Flowers of the Forest are a' wede away.*

'Isn't it smashing?' said Binnie, when the tune had died. 'I thought it would be just the thing for you, Mrs Gavin. You *do* like it — don't you?'

'Yes, of course,' Laura replied, hardly knowing what else to say.

‘Did you know that Florian is going to stay with Grandmamma Binnen? It’s for his bust, and she’s delighted, I expect. He’ll be rather a relief after the two dim aunts. Opal and Ruby *are* rather dreadful, didn’t you think?’

‘They are more than dreadful,’ said Florian. ‘They are positively sinister. Opal, in particular, gives me the creeps. Fat people often do. Julius Caesar was mistaken. Lean and hungry men *are* to be trusted. Fat, sleek-headed ones are not reliable, no matter how well they sleep at night. What say you, Mrs Gavin?’

‘I have had no opportunity to form a judgment,’ said Laura shortly. She would as soon have attended a session of the Black Mass in the form of a believer as to have criticised her own relatives to comparative strangers. Out of the corner of her eye she could see her employer in earnest conversation with the proprietors of the street-organ.

‘An odd encounter,’ said Dame Beatrice, when they had returned to their hotel for lunch.

‘I don’t know which of them, Binnie or Florian, I think the more gosh-awful,’ said Laura. ‘By the way, how did the organ-grinders get hold of that tune? I noticed you were talking to them.’

‘They told me that it had been in their repertoire for many years.’

Laura observed that it must have had something to do with the war. Purposely she left this reference extremely vague, but when she and Dame Beatrice were at lunch, she observed,

‘Did it strike you that there was more in that invitation this morning than met the eye?’

‘Oh, no, I don’t think so,’ Dame Beatrice replied.

‘How did you like the tune?’

‘*The Flowers of the Forest*? Your son, our dear Hamish, sings it, I remember, accompanying himself on his guitar.’

‘I know. He sings out of tune. Anyway, a guitar is a most unsuitable instrument for Scottish airs. Still, I suppose... Auld Lang Syne, and all that, apart... I’m just as pleased he doesn’t want to learn the bagpipes. The piano and the organ, plus this ghastly guitar, are more than enough in one family.’

‘I knew a young man,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘who was similarly placed to Kipling’s hero of the “choose between me and your cigar” fame. You remember the poem, perhaps? Well, in the case I am quoting, the young man was asked to choose between his young woman and his bagpipes. She said the pipes made her feel ill.’

‘And which did he choose?’

‘Unhesitatingly he chose the bagpipes. You would care to hazard a guess as to the outcome of this possibly doleful story?’

‘Oh, yes. He got his own way and the girl as well. She had to put up with the bagpipes because she wanted the toy.’

‘You speak with an authoritative note which compels my admiration and respect.’

‘Oh, well, you’re not the only psychologist among those present,’ said Laura, squinting modestly down her nose. ‘You should read the women’s magazines. That’s where I pick up my tips on feminine psychology, and I may say that they always work out.’

‘Dear me! What a mine of information I seem to have missed! Tell me more.’

‘No, no. *You* tell me what the organ-grinders said.’

‘Their ability to speak English was surprisingly limited, judging by my experience of most of the Netherlanders we have met, but I understood them to say that they had no idea how the tune had come to be part of their instrument’s stock-in-trade. They do not like the air. They prefer gay tunes, but some of the foreign tourists like this one, so I was told.’

‘Must be the Scottish tourists, I should think.’

‘True,’ said Dame Beatrice; but she spoke in an absent-minded manner and Laura realised that her thoughts were elsewhere. This was proved when she added, ‘Extreme wealth, in some cases, may exercise a subversive influence on its owners.’

‘All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, but the power of money corrupts absolutelier than any other power, you think? commented Laura. ‘Doesn’t always work out that way, though, does it? Look at Lord Nuffield.’

‘Ah, but he seems to have been more interested in motor cars than in money. I cannot see him as a case in point.’

‘Talking of money,’ said Laura, after a pause, ‘what about Grandmother Rebekah? She seemed the most gosh-awful old girl, I thought, and crude, at that, but I noticed you didn’t agree.’

‘She is loyal, out-spoken, vulgar and dependable, dear child, I imagine. But Time will show. That is, if we ever meet Mrs Rose again.’

‘As you say. What did you make of the other grandmother?’

‘Mrs Colwyn-Welch? If there is such a thing as a typical Dutchwoman, I think it is she.’

‘No, but what did you *make* of her?’

‘I think she keeps those middle-aged daughters on too tight a rein.’

‘I wish I knew why the tunes on that barrel-organ included *The Lament for Flodden*,’ said Laura. ‘It doesn’t make sense. The French might be interested, but why the Dutch?’

‘Perhaps we have been warned,’ said Dame Beatrice, with mock solemnity.

CHAPTER FOUR

Maastricht and Valkenburg

‘La curiosité la plus remarquable de Fauquemont est la grotte municipale.’

Local Brochure



The province of Limburg,’ pronounced Laura, a day or two later, surveying from the terrace of their hotel a view of hills and woods, ‘does not make me think of Holland at all. Holland is flat, canalised and consists of a mixture of tulips, clogs, windmills, polders and patched trousers.’

‘It is obvious to me,’ said Dame Beatrice, putting down a cup which had contained the usual excellent Dutch coffee, ‘that your holiday is doing you good. What do you wish to do this afternoon?’

‘Well, according to the book of words supplied free gratis and for nothing by this excellent hostelry, there seems to be something at Maastricht called the Hill of St Pietersburg. It lies two miles, or thereabouts, to the south of the town, and has an enormous quarry with tunnels two hundred miles long and fifty feet high. It possesses an art gallery and some prehistoric remains in the form of fossils. Many famous names are inscribed on the walls and, in direct contradiction of the urgent appeals of our own National Trust and other bodies concerned with the preservation of ancient monuments, visitors are actually *invited* to add their own signatures to the names of the great. We are even informed that this testimony to the fact that we once lived, moved and had our being will be in evidence for at least a thousand years. There is only one snag about visiting these caves.’

Dame Beatrice cackled.

‘I am delighted to hear it,’ she said. ‘The idea of heaven, without a hint or two of hell, would be intolerable. Describe this little rift within the lute.’

‘We *must* have a guide to take us round.’

‘It seems a reasonable precaution. Even the most intrepid of hikers, (why so-called?), and speleologists, might burke at the thought of two hundred miles of underground galleries and labyrinths. Let us, then, guide included, spend the

afternoon in the bowels of the earth.'

They drove to Maastricht and attempted this, but discovered that the conducted tour took only about an hour and a half. Dame Beatrice declined to add her inscription to those of Sir Walter Scott, the Duke of Alba, and Monsieur Voltaire, or her initials to those of Napoleon Bonaparte. Laura explained to the guide, on her own behalf, that childhood inhibitions forbade her to scribble on walls, the practice being frowned upon in England, Wales and her native land of Scotland. Of Eire and Northern Ireland, she added, she could not speak. The guide expressed disappointment and surprise (in excellent English) and appeared to be politely astonished when the ladies tipped him.

'Well, now,' said Laura, when they had emerged into daylight once more, 'where do we go from here?'

'Not, at any rate, the way of four monks who perished of hunger in those galleries,' said Dame Beatrice. 'I dislike the idea (desiccated though I am) of being discovered, in the years to come, a dried-up corpse. This reminds me, although the reason for it is elusive, that we were offered no opportunity to inspect the mushrooms which, I understand, are cultivated in large numbers down there.'

'We inspected the bats, though,' said Laura. 'Was your childhood made hideous by the thought that bats might get caught in your hair?'

'No, child. Was yours?'

'I didn't bother. I always had short hair, you see. It is a tactical advantage to have short hair, I always think. Men and boys discovered that long ago. It can't be tugged at, as pig-tails can.'

'In my youth, the thing to do was to be able to sit on one's hair. I could never accomplish it,' confessed Dame Beatrice.

'I can't see the point of it, anyway,' said Laura.

'It annoyed one's aunts if one's cousins had shorter hair than one's own, and it induced unwarranted and sinful pride in one's mother. In my own case, my aunts were spared much heart-burning and sorrow, and my mother was decently humbled. I had a very happy childhood, take it for all in all, for my mother accepted her fate and I myself was compensated by lavish gifts of money from my uncles to make up to me for my obvious inability to emulate their daughters, who could all, without exception, sit on their hair whenever they were bidden to do so.'

Laura laughed and then added that her son Hamish preferred the Spartans to the Athenians.

‘In the matter of hair?’ Dame Beatrice enquired.

‘Well,’ replied Laura, ‘he’s read a book at school which states that Spartan kids had their hair cropped until they reached man’s estate, when they were permitted to grow it to considerable length, but that Athenian boys wore their hair long and had it cut when they were grown-up.’

‘And his reason for desiring Spartan citizenship?’

‘He doesn’t want to grow up.’

‘Abortive, but interesting.’

‘I call it irresponsible. I dread the idea of rearing a Peter Pan. Still, there’s one grain of comfort — at least Hamish doesn’t show any ambition to be an engine-driver.’

‘It is as well. It seems as though there will soon be very few engine-drivers needed,’ Dame Beatrice mildly observed. ‘Engine-driving seems bound to become an overcrowded profession (if Doctor Beeching has his way with the railways) and the sensible thing would be to avoid it.’

‘What do you suggest Hamish should do, then?’ asked Laura, still amused.

‘I have often thought,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘that (so long as one was assured of a small but regular remittance from home) the pursuit of beach-combing has much to recommend it.’

‘Beach-combing?’ said Laura thoughtfully. ‘It must be the ideal life, if you’re gifted that way. But Hamish would be bored. He’s so horribly energetic. I can’t think why, I’m sure. I’m as lazy as Hall’s dog, and Gavin’s idea of relaxation and bliss is to sit in a deckchair and smoke a pipe while somebody else mows the lawn. Well, never mind. What were we talking about before we talked about Hamish?’

‘Bats and long hair, dear child.’

‘Oh, yes. Have we exhausted the subject? I think we must have done, if we’ve been reduced to talking about my son.’

They drove back to Valkenburg. It was about eight miles away, and a holiday town, in a district optimistically entitled ‘the Dutch Alps.’ Dame Beatrice had been instructed on no account to leave it out of her itinerary. She and Laura, therefore, had planned to stay in Valkenburg a matter of several days. Dame Beatrice wanted to collate her lecture-notes, with a view to incorporating them in a book she had been writing, off and on, for the past six or seven years, and Laura, who had offered to help with this project, was bidden to enjoy the scenery and to walk, ride and climb.

Laura was loath to leave her employer. They sat all morning on the terrace of

the hotel. It overlooked the rocky gorge of the River Geul and from it Laura could gaze across the tree-clad valley to the mild green hills beyond the church. Dame Beatrice sat at a small table and wrote her book, pausing only for morning coffee, at which point she reiterated her command that Laura should go out and enjoy herself.

‘All right. I’ll go out immediately after lunch,’ Laura promised. ‘Meanwhile, I’m quite content to lounge about here and look at the view and attempt to sum up our fellow-guests.’

No sooner had she said this than it was borne in upon her that some of these fellow-guests were old acquaintances, for out on to the terrace came Binnen, escorted by Florian and followed by Opal and Ruby.

They saw Laura at once, and came towards her. Laura, zealous to preserve Dame Beatrice’s peace and quiet, went to meet them, greeted them with as much warmth as she could muster and led them to a table where they would be (she hoped) out of earshot of her employer. Dame Beatrice, conscious of this kindly manoeuvre, settled again to her writing. Laura collected a passing waiter and suggested cocktails. The family elected to drink Dutch gin.

‘So you came to our beloved Valkenburg,’ said the heavily-built Opal. ‘That is so nice. Nobody should miss it.’

‘Professor van Zestien told us the same thing,’ said Laura. ‘It is very beautiful here.’

‘You must visit the grotto,’ said Ruby, who, in contrast to her sister, was so extraordinarily thin that Laura concluded she must take after her father’s side of the family.

‘We saw the grotto at Maastricht,’ said Laura. ‘Is this one as good?’

Florian said, before his aunt could answer:

‘I shall go there with you this afternoon and you can judge for yourself.’ He glanced across at Dame Beatrice. ‘Just the two of us,’ he added.

‘No, no,’ exclaimed Opal. ‘This afternoon you return to Amsterdam for your sitting. His portrait-bust,’ she explained, turning to Laura. ‘Binnie is there to be with you and encourage you,’ she added to Florian.

‘That can wait,’ said Florian. ‘I did not know we should meet Mrs Gavin here.’

Laura felt certain that this was a lie, since she had heard Dame Beatrice outline her plans at the dinner in Amsterdam.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said firmly, ‘but I haven’t the slightest intention of visiting the grotto this afternoon. That also can wait.’ She gestured towards the table at

which Dame Beatrice was working. 'I may be needed, you see.'

'Oh, I forgot you were in paid employment,' said Florian, spitefully, and with his wolfish smile.

'As it *is* paid,' retorted Laura, 'I feel that I must honour my obligations instead of rushing off without finding out whether my services are required. And now let's have another drink. I *think* my emoluments will stand the strain. Same again for everybody?'

Florian got up, gave his chair an irritable shove which sent it cannoning into the table, and took himself off.

'Spoilt,' said Binnen. 'I apologise on his behalf. He does not want to have his head done.'

'No, he wants it looked at,' thought Laura, 'and then smacked.' But she did not express these theories aloud. She ordered a round of drinks and the talk turned on the Colwyn-Welch plans for the immediate future. The professors had been forthcoming about their family history at the lunch which Dame Beatrice had attended at the close of the Conference, but the Colwyn-Welch women were even more agreeable to discussing their home affairs.

'Now that there is this business of Binnie and Bernardo,' said Binnen, taking an appreciative sip of her gin, 'Florian will probably leave his grandfather's house until after the wedding. He does not like Bernardo and has no wish to see dear little Binnie married.'

'To Bernardo in particular?' asked Laura.

'That, of course, but he says he does not wish to see her married at all. He thinks that, at nineteen, she is not old enough to be married.'

'Our uncle van Zestien is in favour of the match,' said Opal. 'There is money in the Rose family. Our cousin, Maarte van Zestien, married Bernardo's father, Sigismund Rose, and that with the full approval of both families. Diamonds, you see. The two businesses are connected.'

'Diamonds are all very well,' said Binnen, 'but they do not grow, as bulbs do. There is money in bulbs, just as there is in diamonds, but a nicer way to earn it.' She went on to talk of bulbs, bulb-growing and bulb marketing. When she paused, her daughter Opal said:

'To me, Florian is like the flower of the hyacinth.'

'Yes, a Delft Blue,' agreed her sister. 'That is why I would have preferred a painted portrait rather than a piece of sculpture. If we could find a good painter, I would pay for the portrait myself, if I could possibly afford it.'

'No, no! A bust gives a much better likeness,' protested Opal. 'Besides, our

mother, who is paying, prefers a bust, do you not, Mamma? But I wish to pay.'

'While I live you have only what I am good enough to give you out of your father's money,' said Binnen. 'After my death, you will have a fortune, both of you. If you sell my bulb-fields... as I suppose you will... you may even have quite a *large* fortune. I do not know what the land and goodwill may fetch, but my brother, your uncle Bernard van Zestien, will help you. Our family business was in bulbs until Bernard sold his share and went into the diamond trade, but he still understands our tulips and hyacinths and, to a lesser extent, our crocuses, daffodils and gladioli. You will go to him for advice.'

'Yes, of course, Mamma,' said Ruby; but Opal merely shrugged, as though in complete disagreement with this counsel. Almost immediately after this, lunch was announced. The Colwyn-Welch family moved away and Laura waited beside Dame Beatrice while the latter finished off a paragraph.

'It was kind of you to side-track our friends,' she said, putting her work together. 'I shall leave this now, and go on with it this afternoon while you are out. I gather that you do not propose to avail yourself of Mr Florian's invitation to take you to visit the grotto.'

'I can't *stand* the beautiful boy!' said Laura. 'Unless he smiles, he reminds me of a Harold Copping drawing in a religious book for kids... charming to look at, but remote from life as it has to be lived, and from boys as one knows they really are — thugs and criminals, for the most part — criminals, anyway.'

'Dear me!' said Dame Beatrice, 'I hope we do not need to include Hamish!'

'He's a thug,' declared his mother, 'and will be a criminal as soon as he is old enough to know right from wrong.'

Immediately after lunch, during which she perceived that Florian had rejoined his relatives, Laura set off to visit the Knight's Castle. She did not find the restored edifice particularly interesting, but she enjoyed the view and decided to mount the Wilhelmina Tower in order to obtain an even wider impression of the undoubtedly beautiful countryside.

She took the chair-lift to the top of the tower and was astonished, and not at all delighted, to find Binnie, among other visitors, in possession of the view. Binnie came to the subject which, apparently, was exercising her mind to the exclusion of much else.

'I say!' she exclaimed. 'I did hope you'd be here! I'm so glad you're not with your little old lady. She absolutely terrifies me! I say, you do think I'm doing the right thing in marrying Bernardo, don't you? You see, it's such a *sensible* arrangement. I do wish Florian wouldn't be so sticky about it. After all, I can't

remain a spinster all my life, can I?’

‘How do *I* know?’ asked Laura. ‘By the way, I thought you were in Amsterdam to hold your brother’s hand at his sitting.’

‘Oh, Gran and the aunts wanted me to, but I got bored as soon as they left, so I hired a car and had lunch in Maastricht and then came on here to pick up and go back with them, but so far I haven’t set eyes on them. I suppose I’ll run into them later. What are you going to do next? I bet you’re thinking of the grotto. Let’s do it together. I shall probably scream when we get inside. I suffer from claustrophobia, you see.’

‘I suffer from schizophrenia,’ said Laura. ‘It makes me violent. If you screamed I should probably knife you.’

Binnie giggled.

‘I do so awfully admire you, if you don’t mind my saying so,’ she observed in ardent tones. ‘So we’ll do the grotto together, shall we? Have you really got a knife on you? I knew a man who threatened his wife with one. It was called a lethal weapon, and he was fined something quite appalling for possessing it. That was in England, of course. We live in England. I think I must have told you. Now that I’m engaged to Bernardo, though, Florian says he’s going to live over here with Grandma Binnen. I only hope he likes it. If you ask *me*, Aunt Ruby is a man-eater.’ She giggled again. ‘Come to think of it,’ she added, ‘she looks as though she could do with a square meal or so, doesn’t she?’

Laura declined to comment on Aunt Ruby’s undoubtedly cadaverous appearance, and found herself committed to accompanying Binnie to the grotto. The guide counted heads at the beginning of the expedition, and at times repeated this procedure. It would have been easy enough, Laura realised, to lose a tourist or so on the journey if this had not been done. To her satisfaction, Binnie remained almost entirely silent during the tour, breaking into loquacity only once or twice to remark that the effigy of the dragon and that of the crocodile reminded her of Laura’s formidable employer, saying which she giggled violently.

‘I wonder,’ she said, when they emerged, ‘what it would be like to get lost down there? I should try to make for the chapel, and pray and pray and *pray* until somebody found me. They’d *have* to find you, wouldn’t they?’

Laura replied, rather shortly, that some tourists were utterly irresponsible and deserved to get lost if they refused to obey the rules. She added that she had enjoyed the trip and that she agreed with the guide that ‘nature and art had combined to make one of the wonders of the modern world.’ Binnie assented

wholeheartedly to this tongue-in-cheek paraphrase, and added that they had been walking on the bed of a prehistoric ocean. She particularised.

‘That underground lake!’ she exclaimed. ‘I suppose that was just the ultimate remains of the sea!’

‘Fresh water, and drinkable, according to the guide,’ said Laura. ‘Doesn’t sound much like the sea.’

Binnie giggled.

‘There shall be no more sea,’ she quoted. ‘A funny idea, don’t you think?’

‘I don’t care about it at all,’ Laura replied. ‘Patmos may have been one thing, but the British Isles are quite another.’

‘You are too utterly with it,’ said Binnie earnestly. ‘I think I should agree with every word you ever uttered. Your voice is sheer magic in my ears.’

‘Oh, go and boil your head,’ retorted Laura. ‘You bore me stiff, you little chump!’

Binnie giggled again. Suddenly she spotted her relatives.

‘Now to confess to Gran that I hadn’t the money to pay for the car, so the garage are chalking it up to her account,’ she said. ‘They’re the people she always hires from, so I knew it would be all right. Do her good to sub. up for once. She’s terribly mean, you know. Well, well, so long! Be seeing you!’

‘I sincerely hope not,’ said Laura.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Dinner in North Norfolk

‘My food was plain, but always varied and wholesome, and the good red wine was admirable.’

Samuel Butler



A considerable amount of work awaited Dame Beatrice and Laura on their return to England, and for two or three weeks they lived and were kept busy at the Kensington house and at Dame Beatrice's London clinic. The arrears of secretarial work were cleared up eventually by Laura and then she learned that the tiresome case on which her husband had been engaged for some months had been resolved and that he was due for leave. Upon being apprised of this fact, Dame Beatrice opted for Laura's immediate return to the Stone House in Hampshire, where Detective Chief-Inspector Gavin could join her while they planned how most enjoyably to spend the free time offered to him.

‘And leave you here on your own?’ demanded Laura.

‘Although, like Katisha, I may well be sufficiently decayed,’ retorted Dame Beatrice, ‘I am not physically inert, mentally deranged or spiritually stagnant. I shall manage very well for a week or two. Moreover, as your son's school holidays are imminent, you may direct him to proceed hither, and I will do what I can to entertain him and keep him out of your way for a week or two.’

‘You spoil him.’

‘No, I do not. I feel that Hamish benefits from my tutelage. Besides, Carey will invite him to stay on his pig-farm. Hamish loves pigs and is very good with them. Denis will be there, and so will Jonathan, Deborah and their twins, besides Jenny's own couple of children. There will be plenty for Hamish to do, and that, as you well know, is the agreed formula for a child's health and happiness. Nothing distresses me more than to hear a whining little boy (girls are not so prone to this particular malady or maladjustment) begging his parents to tell him whether there is not anything he can *do*. It is a serious malaise, and I do feel most strongly...’

‘All right, you win,’ said Laura. ‘And thanks,’ she added. ‘It *will* be rather nice to have Gavin to myself for a bit. Besides, I expect he’s tired. It’s been the brute of a case, I believe.’

So Laura betook herself to Hampshire. After a hectic week in London (during which he visited London Airport, spent a day in the Science Museum, went to two plays, two films, two restaurant lunches, one restaurant dinner, was given a tape recorder and chose a dozen ‘pop’ records) her son was driven to the village of Stanton St John in Oxfordshire, there to spend a blissful couple of weeks on Carey Lestrangle’s pig-farm.

‘Pigs,’ he wrote to his mother, ‘are quite heaven.’

‘So I suppose they *do* have wings, after all,’ said his father, when Laura passed him their son’s letter. ‘Lewis Carroll seems to have been uncertain about it, but Hamish has clinched the matter.’

They spent an idyllic holiday, riding, walking and driving in the New Forest, and in Dorset, Wiltshire and Oxfordshire. They also spent one unforgettable day with their son.

‘It’s not that I *want* you,’ said Hamish, ‘but you may as well see me in action.’ He released a year-old Landrace boar and gave it a playful slap on the hindquarters before he ran away. The boar galloped after him, tried to run between his legs and screamed with delight as it sent him sprawling. Hamish got up and chased the animal. When it turned on him, he tore away again. Carey came up and joined Laura and Gavin.

‘I don’t worry at all about Hamish, but is it all right for the boar?’ asked Laura. ‘He seems rather excited, don’t you think?’

‘Oh, yes, but Kelvedon King Arthur likes a game. I’m keeping him off service for a bit. He damaged himself a little at the last one, and fooling about like this with Hamish keeps him interested and lively. That boy is a born pigman.’

Laura expressed delight. Her husband guffawed. Carey collected the boar and shut him up again. Hamish dusted himself down and joined them. He wore a self-satisfied smile.

‘Well?’ he asked. ‘How did I do?’

‘Trot up to the house, old man,’ said Gavin. ‘The postman was in the lane as I came along.’

‘A postal order from Mrs Dame,’ said Hamish. ‘I was expecting it. She said she thought she could sell my golden hamsters for me, and I expect she’s done it. She’s awfully gifted, isn’t she?’

His elders declined to reply, so he trotted off, fully aware of his own grace, beauty and strength.

‘I don’t know!’ said Laura, with a groan. ‘He gets more and more dreadful every day!’

‘Oh, he’s all right,’ said Gavin.

‘Very much all right,’ said Carey. ‘If you don’t like him, why didn’t you have a girl?’

‘I wouldn’t know how to bring up a girl,’ said Laura.

‘Well, you don’t bring Hamish up. He brings himself up,’ said her husband. ‘And not making at all a bad job of it, either,’ he added, watching his son’s progress towards the house. ‘Hope he gets his postal order all right. If not, we’ll have to give him one.’

‘Oh, Mrs Croc. *spoils* him,’ said Laura, crossly, ‘and so do you!’

‘With the result that when, in the years to come, he gets into all the scrapes a young man is heir to, Aunt Adela will haul him out of them by the scruff of his neck and a few words that will inevitably blister his ears,’ said Carey, ‘and I’m all for it. She has a wonderfully good influence on him.’

Hamish capered up to them, an envelope in each hand. He gave one to Laura and then, flourishing the other, performed a silent war-dance.

‘May I open it?’ he said politely to Laura, when she had read her own letter and was scowling thoughtfully at it.

‘Eh?’ she said, coming to. ‘Yes, of course. Why do you ask?’

‘Because I saw yours was from Mrs Dame, too, so I thought perhaps you’d rather discuss yours first.’

‘Good heavens!’ exclaimed Laura. ‘Don’t tell me you’ve a few manners after all!’

‘You shock me, Mamma,’ replied Hamish, seriously. ‘Did you suppose you had begotten a monster? That’s the sort of thing old Caveat says to us in R.E. at school. He’s always talking about begottings and reading them to us out of the O.T.’

‘Begettings.’ said Gavin, taking the letter which Laura handed to him.

‘Actually, begattings,’ said his son. ‘You know...’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Gavin, hastily cutting short the genealogical tables of the patriarchs. ‘Read your letter and then trot along to the village post-office and cash your postal-order. What do you intend to do about this?’ he added to his wife as he handed back the letter she had passed to him. Laura drew her brows together.

‘Well, I don’t know,’ she said. ‘We’re both invited and it would make a couple of days out. What do you think?’

‘So long as Grandmother Rebekah is going to be there, I can’t wait to get started,’ replied Gavin. ‘On the other hand... well, we don’t get very much time to ourselves, and now that we’ve paid this duty visit to Hamish, I wondered whether, perhaps, a bit of peace and quiet, far from the madding crowd, and all that...’

‘Say no more,’ said Laura. ‘About dining out I’m like P. G. Wodehouse’s vicar on the subject of orphreys — I can take dinner parties or I can leave them alone. Let’s ditch this one. I’d much rather we did.’

Dame Beatrice, therefore, with a mental commendation of their good sense, and driven by her impeccable chauffeur George, went to Norfolk without Laura and Gavin, and arrived at Bernard van Zestien’s square-built seventeenth-century mansion at six o’clock on the evening of the proposed festivity. This, she had been informed, was to be held in celebration of the engagement of Binnie to Bernardo, an arrangement with which (so Binnie informed Dame Beatrice when she had conducted her to her room) Granduncle Bernard was exceptionally well pleased.

‘Such a relief,’ prattled Binnie, before leaving Dame Beatrice to dress for dinner, ‘because one never knows exactly how the old darling is going to take *anything*! I could give you dozens of instances. He’s quite, quite unpredictable. Oh, well, I suppose Bernardo is certain now to get most of the money. I shall have to insist on a marriage settlement, or whatever it is, shan’t I? After all, I *am* a relation, too, and actually a bit nearer the throne than Bernardo. But, of course, Granduncle would never leave any money to a *girl*.’

‘Excuse me, miss,’ said an elderly maid who had been deputed to look after Dame Beatrice during her stay in the house. ‘Perhaps Madam should get on. I have drawn the bath, madam.’

‘Oh, of course! Sorry!’ said Binnie, beating a hasty and undignified retreat. ‘Be seeing you, Dame Beatrice.’

‘I have known Miss Binnie since childhood, madam,’ the abigail observed when, a little later, she was arranging Dame Beatrice’s hair. ‘And when you’ve known them as children, you cannot hardly credit they’re grown up. Miss Binnie and Master Florian have lived here for more years than I care to count. Their father and mother own hotels in Scotland and it seem they thought hotel life was no life for children to lead — not permanent, that is — and I must say that, in my opinion, most thinking people would agree with them. Hotel life is unnatural.’

Everybody behave quite different to what they would in private. I wholly think children would grow up with false ideas, don't you?'

'You are a Norfolk woman, then,' said Dame Beatrice, avoiding the question.

'Oh, yes, madam. Born and bred in Holt, where my son go to the school. Gresham's School that do be called. The main part is out on the Cromer Road. You may have seen it.'

'Your son is studying science, then, among other subjects? I understand that the school obtains excellent examination results, and particularly in science.'

'He's a clever boy and a good boy. That's why I go on working. His father's in a good job, but what my boy need he's going to have, although I like to keep it dark that I'm in service. His father work in Cromer, so that's where we fare to live. We leave Holt as soon as we hear he get the scholarship, not to stand in his way.'

Dame Beatrice had often wondered whether this kind of self-sacrifice by parents on behalf of their children was justifiable, but she supposed that it was their own business. At half-past seven she went downstairs to the dining-room for cocktails, and had a chat with her host before dinner.

Leyden Hall, in spite of its Dutch name, had been built by an unnamed English architect in the late Jacobean period and had sustained and absorbed some alterations in the year 1670 when it had changed owners. The staircase, broad and handsome, was uncarpeted to display the shallow oak treads. Heraldic devices, borne on shields carried by black, improbable-looking lions, adorned the newels.

A broad window on the landing provided a fine view of the gardens and lake, and magnificent trees screened an expanse of pasture for cattle. To gain the dining-room Dame Beatrice had passed under an arch in an over-decorated stone screen, and found herself opposite the front door and in a spacious vestibule from which the dining-room and the library opened on her right and the gun-room and an entrance to the housekeeper's room and the servants' quarters on her left.

The door to the gun-room, an apartment no longer used for its original purpose, but as an adjunct to the dining-room, was open, and there was the sound of many voices. As the party was to number sixteen, and since all but herself were, in some degree, related, the noise seemed only natural. Above the general family din, she could distinguish the screaming tones of Grandmother Rebekah Rose and the resonant voice of Bernardo. She supposed that the usual verbal sparring-match was in progress, a supposition which was borne out when

she entered the room. Florian, she saw, was among those present. So were his relations from Amsterdam. Florian's superb head was heavily bandaged and there were bluish shadows under his hyacinth-blue eyes. He was pale.

Dame Beatrice, the physician uppermost in her at the sight of the injured boy, went over to him.

'The barrel-organ was great fun,' she said, 'but what have you been doing to yourself since?'

Florian touched the bandages on his head.

'This?' he said. 'Oh, I had a silly accident about a week ago. I suppose the maids got excited about having so many people in the house. Usually there are only Granduncle, Binnie and myself. Anyway, somebody must have left a great lump of floor-polish on the stairs outside my room, and I was making rather rapidly for the bathroom on the floor below when I took a most terrible toss and hit my head. Luckily it didn't kill me. Nobody will own up to having left any polish on the stairs, needless to say. As it happened, I'd been trying putting on my face-towel as a turban and I thought it looked rather good. Well, I had my bath-towel over my arm and my sponge-bag in the other hand, so, when I slipped, I was a bit helpless, you see. According to the doctor, my turban probably saved my life. As it was, my head took a pretty good bashing. Everybody was much excited and alarmed.'

He seemed delighted to have been the centre of so much attention, but Dame Beatrice was not equally pleased. Servants, even incapable ones, do not leave 'great lumps of floor-polish' on uncarpeted wooden stairs. A malicious practical joke seemed much more likely. She gazed around her. Nobody present, with the possible exception of the volatile Binnie, seemed capable of perpetrating a practical joke, and, surely, even Binnie would have realised that this particular trick was highly dangerous.

She looked at Bernardo, at the moment in high argument, as usual, with his Jewish grandmother. This time it was in connection with his forthcoming marriage to Binnie, a project of which she disapproved for reasons which she again proceeded to voice.

'Maybe you marry the money, but where do you get this wedding of the Dutch Reformed Church?' she yelled.

'Grandfather van Zestien wants it that way, darling. And if I am to marry the money, as you so charmingly put it, I must marry in the Dutch Reformed Church. That's all there is to it.'

'Should be by the synagogue with you!'

‘At the synagogue. But you forget, dear heart, that I am of mixed blood. Only half of me is Jewish. My mother is Dutch, remember.’

A fair-skinned, round-faced, middle-aged woman interrupted the discussion.

‘Go away, Bernie.’ she said, in a commanding voice and with a slightly guttural accent. ‘Make yourself useful.’

‘Very well, Mamma,’ said Bernardo. He saw Dame Beatrice looking at him, went forward at once, greeted her charmingly, led her to Bernard van Zestien and Binnen and then went to the side table to bring her a glass of sherry.

Dame Beatrice had met her host upon arrival, but had had no opportunity to sum him up, since Binnie had almost immediately insisted upon showing her to her room, babbling that Dame Beatrice had had a very long journey and must be very tired. Dame Beatrice, who had had a smooth and comfortable journey from London to Norfolk, had lunched at an hotel in Norwich, and enjoyed an early but leisurely tea in Cromer, and who, in any case, scarcely knew the meaning of the word fatigue, had suffered herself to be led away. Her host, she had been at once aware, found conversation with a stranger somewhat difficult. He was a bald-headed, eagle-beaked old man to whom years of association with Jewish diamond-merchants had given something of an Hebraic appearance and courtly, slightly exaggerated manners. Unlike most of his Jewish friends, however, he was almost tongue-tied, and Dame Beatrice had felt him sigh with relief to see the back of her for an hour or so before dinner.

Now, however, supported by his sister Binnen, his daughter Maarte (Bernardo’s mother) and her handsome Jewish husband, Sigismund, he seemed at ease and contrived to make conversation.

‘We are having this little party,’ he said, ‘to wish well the young people who are to be married, and I take this opportunity, Dame Beatrice, to invite you to the wedding. This shall be in Holland, my country, and in a Protestant Church. The date I will let you know when it is fixed. There are many arrangements for a marriage.’

‘Indeed, yes,’ said Bernardo’s father. ‘It is so. You will be most welcome, Dame Beatrice — *most* welcome!’

‘And now,’ said Binnen, ‘we must find Florian a girl. It is high time for all our young people to be married.’

Florian, who was standing near at hand with his sister Binnie and their mother and father, heard his name and turned round, glass in hand.

‘What was that?’ he asked. Old Bernard chuckled.

‘Your grandmother is arranging for your wedding, *mijnheer*,’ he said. Florian

disfigured his beautiful visage with a wolfish grin.

‘May the gods bless it!’ he retorted; and very deliberately he poured his wine on to the carpet. There was a wail of reproach from Rebekah.

‘Such wicked!’ she screeched. ‘Waste of the wine! Mess of the carpet! Aubusson?’ she added keenly, addressing Bernard. He smiled and nodded. Binnie rang the bell for a maid and a cloth to mop up the sherry. Rebekah seized the cloth from the maid, knelt down and, while mopping up, subjected the carpet to a keen and knowledgeable scrutiny. ‘You have been done,’ she announced. ‘Made in Brussels. Modern. Not bad. Not Aubusson. I will offer two hundred pounds.’

‘So it is Aubusson,’ muttered Bernardo to Binnie, who giggled wildly. She caught her brother’s hostile eye and began to choke. Bernardo patted her gently on the back. Giggling and choking at one and the same time, she changed suddenly to tears and ran out of the room. Rebekah looked at the door through which Binnie had just passed. Then she turned to Bernardo.

‘So she is pregnant, no?’ she demanded. The situation was saved by the butler, who announced that dinner was served. The company, shepherded by Binnen, were shown to their seats in the dining-room. There was a name-card opposite each place. Evidently the dinner was to be a formal occasion of a kind, although not entirely so, as was evident from some of the seating arrangements.

Bernard took the head of the table and Binnen the foot. On Bernard’s right was his daughter Maarte, Bernardo’s mother, on his left was Binnie and next to her Bernardo had been placed. Rebekah sat next to her sparring-partner and Derde was on her left. He was flanked by Dame Beatrice herself, who was upheld also by his brother Sweyn. Flora, the mother of Florian and Binnie, sat on Binnen’s right, and that concluded one side of the table.

On the opposite side, Sigismund sat next to his wife, then came Opal, partnered by Florian, who separated her from her sister Ruby. Frank, Binnen’s son, who was also Flora’s husband and the father of Florian and Binnie, sat between Ruby and the quiet, *svelte* Petra, who thus was on Binnen’s left.

‘Be prepared for my father to say grace,’ murmured Sweyn, as he drew out Dame Beatrice’s chair. Grateful for the hint, Dame Beatrice was fully prepared for the spate of Dutch which preceded the serving of the meal.

‘In the Netherlands, my country,’ announced Bernard van Zestien, raising his head, ‘I serve and eat according to our customs. In England, things are different. I am now following Parson Woodforde’s diary.’

‘Not *pig*!’ screamed Rebekah. ‘You know I do not face pig, neither Bernardo

nor my son Sigismund.'

'What a compliment!' muttered Bernardo. Aloud he added, 'If I remember my Parson Woodforde, darling, there will be so much choice that you can eat nothing but fish, if that is what you want. But don't be such a hypocrite, sweetheart. You haven't bothered about *kosher* food for centuries. What about...'

'No!' shrieked his relative. 'I was drunk. It was bad champagne. You are not to say!'

'All right. I don't let down my nearest and dearest in public.'

Rebekah stared resentfully at the plate of soup which was placed before her. Then she sniffed at it disdainfully.

'Out of season,' she said. 'Is a wintry dish, no? Inherits pork fat, bacon — who knows what?' She pushed her plate aside.

'Never mind, dearest,' said Bernardo. 'You can have a nice raw herring instead.'

'Is to make up to me for losing on mine proteins?' yelled Rebekah. 'I fall for soup!' She seized her plate and hurriedly caught up with the other diners. 'Now perhaps I have your raw herring, isn't it? So eat the nuns in Belgian convents,' she added, with deep resentment.

'Tasty, nourishing and cheap,' said Bernardo. 'Ever eaten rollmops, by any chance, dearest?'

His relative picked up a piece of bread and smacked it into his ear, and, apart from this, the meal proceeded according to plan.

'We have from Parson Woodforde,' announced Bernard van Zestien, 'the account of a meal for the year 1788. We did not take fish with oyster sauce, but, apart from that, the menu stands just as he made it.'

'Impossible!' moaned Rebekah. 'Is all pork!'

'No,' said Bernard, bending upon her his benign, shortsighted gaze. 'There *is* pork, of course. I do not think any eighteenth-century menu could be without it. But there is also boiled beef, hashed turkey, mutton steaks, roast wild duck and fried rabbit. There is also...'

'So I eat this infected rabbit, this mix-whatever-it-is!' shrieked Rebekah. 'I do not choose to obtain my diseases from rabbits!'

'Of course not,' said Bernardo, in dangerously quiet tones. 'You obtain your diseases from over-eating and over-drinking, my dear. Now you jolly well eat boiled beef, hashed turkey, and roast mutton, and don't be silly.'

The dinner ended with Parson Woodforde's dessert of olives, almonds,

raisins and apples. Of these Rebekah partook happily and rose, with the rest, to toast the newly-engaged couple. Her only comment was to the effect that her late husband would not have approved of mixed marriages and that King David's peccadillo was entirely owing to Bathsheba. 'Her fault, washing herself in public, so would nobody nice,' said Rebekah, with authority.

'Yes, Uriah *was* a bit of a twerp,' said Bernardo. 'After all, he could have opted out of that battle. He was a Hittite, and the Hittites were a damn' sight more civilised than the Jews of the same era.'

'In subjection! In subjection!' shrieked Rebekah. 'The Jews are always in subjection!'

'He *wasn't* a Jew, dear,' said Bernardo. 'In the words of Bessie Shimmelfarb, give way just a little. In *my* words, for God's sake shut up! You sound a complete old moron, and I'm ashamed of you.'

Few, perhaps, except Dame Beatrice, realised the depths of affection and family pride which obtained between the two contestants. Rebekah glared at her critic and Bernardo peeled an apple with an air of complete detachment. He put two pieces on Rebekah's plate, grinned at her and then, taking up one of the pieces, he bit into it and offered her the rest.

'So you give me best, and so you should,' she shouted. 'You are Adam and Eve, isn't it?'

'Scholars seem doubtful whether the fruit of the Garden of Eden *was* an apple, darling. Personally, I think a pomegranate would be nearer the mark,' said Bernardo.

'Those seeds? So shall cause appendicitis, isn't it?' screamed his relative. 'Did Adam have appendicitis?'

'Well, he did lose a rib. I wonder whether that made any difference?'

'So not nice! You are not nice!' shrieked Rebekah. 'Now we shall change the subject. I look around this room, and what am I seeing?'

'An ass-head of your own,' muttered Bernardo. Rebekah took no notice.

'I see upon the wall,' she announced, 'picture from English artist Romney, representing previous owner of this house. Is inferior copy. I offer twenty pounds.'

'You stick to diamonds,' retorted Bernardo. 'You think you understand pictures? Gorblimey! Besides, that picture has been promised to me for a wedding present.'

'I like you to have my twenty pounds. You are not forgetting the diamond ram you promised me?'

‘I promised you nothing!’

‘For my birthday, yes, you did!’

‘I’ll buy the ram if you’ll buy the thicket.’

Rebekah looked at him suspiciously. Then she said, ‘I am like King Saul. I also am among the prophets. You and I shall be finding ourselves among the thicket and it will be a long time before we are getting out of it. Put that in your pipe, silly boy!’

‘Don’t smoke a pipe,’ said Bernardo.

CHAPTER SIX

Aftermath of a Dinner Party

‘The ample heaven of fabrick sure
In cleanness does surpass
The crystal and the silver pure,
Or clearest polished glass.’

Alexander Hume



Breakfast at nine, madam,’ said the maid who brought Dame Beatrice’s early pot of tea, ‘unless perhaps you’d care to have it in bed.’

‘No, no, thank you, Parks,’ replied Dame Beatrice. ‘I suppose most of the family breakfast downstairs?’

‘All of them, madam, except for some of the ladies.’

Dame Beatrice noticed that Florian was again seated next to his despised aunt Opal, although there were vacant chairs. Her host invited her to sit next to him at the breakfast table and, after some desultory remarks about the weather and the crops, he said, with obvious earnestness,

‘You accepted to stay for the night, but it would give us all great pleasure if you felt you could stay longer. I know you are famous and therefore busy, much occupied with your patients and your friends, but if you could spare us even *one* more day...’

‘Yes, yes,’ shouted Rebekah, who had heard all this. ‘Is not economy to use sheets one night only. Should be three, four, five nights to make laundering pay.’

‘Now, don’t take it upon yourself to make these announcements,’ said Bernardo. ‘They don’t sound proper. People will think you live in the suburbs.’

‘I accept,’ said Rebekah, with a mighty and magnificent wave of a be-ringed and pudgy hand, ‘the sheets of the marriage bed.’

‘For goodness’ sake! You’re making me blush! Here, have a nice bit of cold pork,’ said Bernardo, offering the kind of red-herring which he knew would be irresistible to his grandmother. Her attention distracted, and screaming abuse at him, she ate kippers and buttered toast and demanded that he give her a second

cup of coffee.

‘You are pig! Pig!’ she screamed. Bernardo shrugged.

‘Only half a pig,’ he said. ‘Now, to turn to baser but more important matters, what are you giving me for a wedding present?’

The argument which ensued was still being carried on when the rest of the party left the dining-room. Dame Beatrice looked out upon the lake and the park as she went up to her room, and decided upon a stroll. Accordingly, she arrayed herself in a voluminous cape, placed an improbable purple hat on her head and went downstairs and into the grounds.

The old house was built on a simple pattern so far as the state rooms were concerned. The door which led into the garden was directly opposite the front door, and the stairs were on the garden-entrance side of the screen, and so was the library. Nearly opposite the library door, but at the foot of a couple of shallow steps, was a large cupboard under the main staircase. It was known as the garden room, and it contained a water-tap and a sink and was a place in which freshly-gathered flowers from the garden could be stripped of unwanted leaves and put into vases.

Dame Beatrice descended the couple of steps and opened the door which led into the grounds. She stood on the stone-flagged terrace a moment to admire the prospect. Flower-beds flanked a beautifully-tended lawn, and, sloping down to a considerable stream, were oaks and elms, dominated, in the centre of the lawn, by an impressive cedar-of-Lebanon whose spreading branches over-shadowed a patch of bare ground.

To the left of this cedar was the lake. It was not large compared with the lake, for instance, in the near-by park of Holkham Hall, but it was calm and beautiful, its calmness marred, at the moment of Dame Beatrice’s inspection, by Florian, who was gathering small pebbles from the gravel path and hurling them vindictively into the water. A colony of ducks and a couple of coots were making a noisy retreat, and some swans had come out upon the bank and were taking cover behind the tall reeds.

Dame Beatrice left the vicinity of the house and walked towards the water. Florian swung round as he heard her footsteps on the gravel.

‘I say,’ he said, dropping a handful of pebbles and dusting his palms together, ‘I was hoping you’d come out here. Could I talk to you for a minute?’

‘I should be delighted,’ Dame Beatrice replied. ‘What a charming place this is!’

‘Yes,’ agreed Florian. ‘I don’t know who will have it when my granduncle

goes. I was hoping it would come to me, but I think this wretched engagement of Binnie's may have made a difference to all that. If, in the end, she marries that ape, bang go my chances of inheriting the property, I'm afraid. My granduncle seems insanely keen on this match, the same as he liked my aunt Maarte marrying Bernardo's father. What do you suppose I should do? You see, after all, I do live here. Bernardo (silly name!) doesn't.'

'Your sister does, though,' Dame Beatrice pointed out. Florian (an equally silly name, Dame Beatrice thought) kicked a stone in a moody and disconsolate manner and glumly agreed.

'All the same,' he said, 'I can't see what there will be in it for Binnie. She doesn't even *like* Bernie. She's scared stiff of him, I would say.'

'One can do nothing in such a case,' observed Dame Beatrice. 'True love is the most extraordinary thing in the world. The loved one is not infrequently terrified by the lover.'

'True love? There can't be anything of that sort in this particular situation, and, anyway, I don't care to see my sister married to a mountebank,' argued Florian.

'Of course not. But young Mr Rose does not seem to me to belong to that category. I think he is sincerely fond of your sister (who is, you will agree, immature), and he will make her a very good husband.'

'I can't see that. I think Binnie's making a fool of herself. She *is* a fool, of course, as you say, but this engagement is going a bit too far. She *can't* be fond of that oily, conceited brute!'

They circumnavigated the lake and came to some broad, rough, shallow steps, which led downhill to the pleasant little river.

'Well, here we are,' said Florian gloomily. 'Do you want to go through the gate and on to the riverside path? It isn't bad along there.' He produced a key and unlocked the tall iron gate. 'Have to keep it fastened,' he explained, 'because, otherwise, people could get in. We had a lot of trouble a couple of years ago. It was as bad as Hyde Park in the summer.'

Dame Beatrice ignored this unlikely comparison, and asked briskly, as they threaded their way in single file along the narrow, ill-defined path which ran deviously along the right bank of the river,

'Are you enjoying having your portrait executed? Your aunts, the Misses Colwyn-Welch, seem quite excited about it.'

'Oh, it's not a painting, of course, but only a bit of plaster. I've given a couple of sittings. That chap who calls himself Albion is doing it. Not his real

name, I imagine. Anyway, he's hellishly expensive. The aunts are paupers, of course, but I should have thought that Grandma Binnen was far too sensible to cast her Dutch guilders upon the waters. She knows jolly well that they won't return to her after many days. In other words, I don't think Albion's work is going to be worth a lot in times to come, but, of course, one never knows.'

'You do not see your grandmother's gesture as one of affection and pride — a determination to capture a likeness which, by the time you are fifty, will have vanished for ever?'

'No, I don't. Oh, she thinks well enough of my youth and my appearance, I dare say, but, in my opinion, she must also be cashing in on the chance that Albion's work is going to bring in the guilders later on, although she's wealthy enough not to need them, I should have thought.'

'What else did you want to talk to me about?' asked Dame Beatrice. The path broadened and they came out upon grass-land drained by dykes.

'Talk to you about? Oh, I don't really know. I expect I only needed my hand held about this awful mess of an entanglement that my sister seems to have got herself into. I keep asking myself whether there isn't some way of getting her out of it, you know.'

'What real cause have you to object to Mr Rose as your brother-in-law? He seems to be kindly, spirited, imperturbable and well-mannered. These adjectives cannot be applied to all prospective husbands, I fear.'

'Oh, I don't want my sister to marry him, that's all.'

'Are you certain that, quite simply, you do not wish your sister to marry?'

'She's far too young,' said Florian.

The rest of the walk was taken in silence. They parted from the little river at a wooden foot-bridge which crossed a dyke and led to a lane. Florian showed the way by taking the lead, his head down and his hands in his trousers' pockets. Dame Beatrice left him to brood. They were back at the house in time to hear Bernardo and Binnie laughing together in the hall and a certain amount of scuffling going on. Florian tore in through the garden door. Dame Beatrice seated herself upon the terrace and waited, serenely and philosophically, for what she felt certain would ensue.

She was right. She heard Florian yelling hysterically, then came Bernardo's deeper tones punctuated by Binnie's screams. There was a short interval and then Florian rushed out on to the terrace with a hand to his ribs and his hair in disorder. He tore down to the lake. There was a splash.

Dame Beatrice was prepared to wait. In a matter of seconds, however, she

was joined by Binnie and Bernardo, the latter with a handkerchief wrapped around the knuckles of his left hand.

‘Mr Colwyn-Welch is in the lake,’ she said.

‘It’s nowhere more than three feet deep,’ said Binnie; who was half-crying now, and looking flushed and angry, ‘If anybody tries to interfere, Florian probably *will* drown himself but if nobody takes any notice he’ll just crawl out and go round by the stables to get back to his room. All the same,’ she added, turning suddenly on her swain, ‘you *did* hit him and you *are* bigger than he is. You’d better take back your ring. I don’t like bullies. You *know* he hurt his head when he slipped on the stairs that time.’

‘Well, well!’ exclaimed Bernardo, loosening the handkerchief and gazing at his knuckles. ‘He comes pelting in here like a maniac, interfering in a perfectly ordinary and, so far as I was concerned, a perfectly sporting and quite proper little jam-session, and then hauls off and takes a fair to middling slam at me! What could a man of spirit do?’

‘Hit somebody his own size!’ said Binnie.

‘Not possible, under the circumstances, dear girl. And I did remember his head. That’s why I forebore to slam at it. But he went for me first, for no earthly reason, so, naturally, he copped it. What did you expect?’

Binnie snatched off her engagement ring and flung it on to the stone floor of the terrace.

‘There!’ she said. ‘That’s what I think of *you*!’ From the library out shot old Rebekah Rose. She pounced upon the ring and snatched it up.

‘Damaged! I offer fifty pounds,’ she said briskly. Bernardo laughed and held out his hand for the ring.

‘It will do for Rachel Lomberg, darling,’ he said. ‘When I sell you a ring for fifty pounds it won’t be this one. Give it back, there’s a love. Bernie wants it. What’s more, Binnie will want it later on. You’ll see.’

Rebekah exclaimed in Yiddish and handed over the ring. Bernardo grinned at Binnie and put it in his pocket. Binnie smacked his face.

Dame Beatrice left the terrace and strolled towards the lake. There was no sign of Florian. She went round to the stables. They could be reached from the park by a well-screened path which wound its way through a small plantation of larches. There were reassuring marks of wet footprints. She returned to the house to find the terrace denuded of its late occupants. Pensively she went up to her room to get ready for lunch.

At table she noticed that Florian, dry and changed, although his self-inflicted

ducking had darkened his golden brows and flattened his hair, had seated himself next to his sister, whose left hand was still without a ring. Bernardo sat next to his grandfather and engaged the old man charmingly in conversation, completely ignoring the strident remarks of his grandmother, who was telling Binnen, at the other end of the table, how to grow hyacinths. Binnen, with the stolid patience of her race, allowed the stream of useless advice to flow over her while she addressed herself to the business of getting on with her lunch.

Opal was being squired by Sweyn, who had her sister Ruby on the other side of him. Next to Ruby sat Petra, who should perhaps have been attended to by Bernardo, but, although (or perhaps because) she was one of his closest relatives, he took no notice of her, confining his efforts to making himself extremely agreeable to Bernard except when the old man drew Dame Beatrice (again seated on Bernard's right) into the conversation. The place of honour, as was only natural, had been left for her by the family.

Derde was on her right and devoted himself to her except at such times as she was engaged in conversation with Bernard. At these times he talked to Florian's and Binnie's mother, who was seated between him and her husband. The *hoteliers*, Dame Beatrice had already noted, were a most devoted couple and (no doubt glad of a change from the *bonhomie* expected of them by their clients) kept themselves apart from the rest of the company. They were not, apparently, interested in their children. A joyous reunion, it was abundantly evident, had not taken place. Parents and offspring were strangers to one another.

There seemed a definite coolness, too, between Sigismund (who was seated next to her) and his loud-voiced mother. He ate in silence, except for addressing an occasional remark to Opal, an almost unnecessary courtesy, since Sweyn conversed with her most of the time. The only other member of the party was his wife, old Bernard's daughter. As though in emulation of Binnen, she ate heartily and said not a single word (so far as Dame Beatrice was aware) to anyone.

When lunch was over, the company mounted the stairs to the magnificent drawing-room for coffee. Petra, to whom Dame Beatrice had scarcely spoken, either in Amsterdam or at Leyden Hall, seated herself beside her on a settee and plunged into speech.

'Opal and Ruby and I are making a little expedition to the Point. If you would care to join us we could go in your car, perhaps, if you didn't mind.'

'And what is the Point?' Dame Beatrice asked. Petra mistook her meaning.

'The point of going by car? Well, it's too far to walk there if we want to do any walking afterwards,' she said.

‘No, no,’ Dame Beatrice explained. ‘Of course we shall use the car. I meant merely to ask you to tell me about the Point which appears to be our objective.’

‘Oh, I’m so sorry. Yes, I see. Well, we shall need to hire a boat. There is a nice creek, you see, and the Point is at the end of a pebble beach. From it we can reach the bird-sanctuary.’

‘Delightful. At what hour do you wish to set out?’

Petra looked at her fob-watch, a tiny affair for which, Dame Beatrice felt certain, Petra’s mother (had it belonged to anybody but Petra) would have priced at very much below the obvious value of the rubies with which it was so liberally endowed. She answered quietly,

‘I wondered whether we could leave in about half-an-hour. It’s because of the tide, you see. At low tide you can’t get a boat off the mud. There are salt-marshes and all is very low-lying.’

The salt-marshes, through which the creek ran, stretched on either side of a built-up causeway. In the village there was only one street. It led downhill to three antiquated quays, a number of moored boats, and a very large church with a lantern-tower. This, in ancient times, had shown a light to guide mariners.

Dame Beatrice surveyed the scene and approved of it. The street retained its ancient cobble-stones. The houses were of various periods and were built of various materials, from the almost ubiquitous flint of Norfolk to the sinister modern red brick of country police stations. The salt-marshes appeared to stretch for miles.

‘I had better see a man about a boat,’ said Ruby. ‘Shall we all muck in about the sub.?’

‘Dame Beatrice ought not to pay,’ Petra pointed out. ‘We came here in her car, and there will be oil, petrol and her chauffeur’s wages.’

‘As for me,’ said Opal, ‘I don’t feel like birds and boats. I shall remain on dry land.’

‘For you?’ asked Petra, of Dame Beatrice.

‘I really prefer to remain aloof from birds, but I am completely at the disposal of the rest of you.’

‘Then,’ said Petra, ‘Ruby and I will voyage to the Point and, as you two will not have to help pay for the hire of the boat, you shall treat us to tea at the hotel when we get back. Do you think that would be fair?’

Opal unwillingly and Dame Beatrice enthusiastically agreed that this would be fair. The two of them wandered off along the causeway (which appeared to have no ending this side of the North Pole), and left the other two to negotiate

for the hire of a boat.

‘How long are they likely to be away?’ Dame Beatrice enquired.

‘I do not know. I am glad you did not want to go with them. I need advice and counsel, and I think you are the person to supply these. I am half English, as you know. Do you read English poets?’

‘Some of them.’

‘Do you care for ultra-modern verse?’

‘On the whole, no. I stop short at Mr Cecil Day Lewis. He, at least, has something to say and says it remarkably clearly. Are you versed in his works?’

‘Myself, I stop short (such a nice way of putting it!) at James Elroy Flecker. Do you know his poetry?’

‘Indeed, yes,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Where does this path bring us out?’

‘Oh, nowhere. We just have to go back by the same way as we come. There’s really no choice.’

‘It sounds like one’s life,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Or... you mentioned James Elroy Flecker a moment ago...’

‘Oh, yes, *Hassan*, for example.’

‘Very fine, but I was thinking of some of his shorter pieces.’

‘*The Old Ships*?’

‘Yes, and *The Dying Patriot*.’

‘Very beautiful, but, you see, as a person of mixed nationalities, I find patriotism difficult to understand.’

‘You are what is known as a good European, no doubt. On the whole, James Elroy Flecker was possibly (in spite of *The Dying Patriot*) a good European, too, although one doubts whether he was thinking of a European monarch when he wrote *The Queen’s Song*.’

‘A very slight piece,’ said Opal, suddenly stumbling on some unevenness in the path. ‘I do not care for it. I will return, if I may, to my reason for wishing to take this walk with you. I do not like this engagement between Bernardo and Binnie.’

‘Did you not notice that the engagement had been broken off?’

‘I — no, certainly I did not. Are you sure of this?’

‘I saw the return of the ring. It was most dramatic.’

‘Dramatic?’

‘Miss Colwyn-Welch flung it at Mr Rose’s feet.’

‘I bet,’ said Opal, with venom, ‘that *that* upset the Jewish lot!’

‘On the contrary. Mr Bernardo seemed quite light-hearted about it, and Mrs

Rebekah Rose made a spirited bid for the trinket. She offered fifty pounds.'

'That old woman is mad! I know for a certainty that Bernardo paid at least a thousand pounds for the ring, and it would have cost him half as much again if he had not negotiated for it through another of his race.'

'How good it is of the Jews to stick together over these matters.'

'If only my mother's brother did not approve of the match, it would never be permitted,' said Opal, ignoring the goodness of the Jews. 'Let us sit down on my waterproof coat. I should like a rest.'

'Mr Bernard van Zestien? I could not help noticing that, when he and Mr Bernardo sat next to one another at luncheon, they appeared to be on very friendly terms,' said Dame Beatrice, when they had seated themselves.

'Oh, Bernardo has that sort of way with him. No doubt it helps him in business matters. I have no doubt, either, that it helped him to ensnare poor little Binnie, and, of course, even if the engagement *has* been broken off, his charm will be used to get her back again — *if* he wants her!' They sat for a considerable time in silence. At last Opal said. 'Perhaps we had better turn back. Tea at the hotel begins to be served at four o'clock. I see no reason to wait for my sister and Petra to join us. We can give them their tea when they arrive. I still don't see why we have to help pay for their boat-hire — because that is what it comes to. What do you think of perpetuating Florian's beauty?'

'I should like to see the bust when it is finished,' said Dame Beatrice, with truth. She and Opal arrived at the hotel to find that Petra and Ruby had preceded them.

'The Point is nothing,' said Petra. 'Having said pebbles, that is everything one can say. It is cold and bleak, the water was rough and the birds are not interesting.'

'I am glad I didn't go,' said Opal. 'You have eaten the best of the cakes.'

'That doesn't mean much in a place like this,' said Petra.

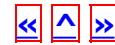
Dame Beatrice was silent during tea. Her chance reference to *The Queen's Song* had set her wondering.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Disappearance of an Heir

‘The state of man does change and vary,
Now sound, now sick, now blyth, now sary,
Now dansand mirry, now like to die:
Timor mortis conturbat me.’

William Dunbar



I think,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘that before they return to the Netherlands we should invite the van Zestien brothers and their father to visit us at the Stone House. Do you think dear Robert could join us?’

‘I expect he could come to dinner, anyway. What about the rest of the family? — not that we could put all of them up for the night,’ said Laura.

‘I did think we might invite them for lunch, although it seems a long way for them to come just for that.’

‘Yes, it does. Anyhow, the three men are the ones who’ve shown us hospitality, and Mrs Colwyn-Welch and her daughters have gone back to Holland, haven’t they?’

‘I imagine that they have, and, as we do not know whether the chasm between Bernardo and Binnie has been bridged, it might be embarrassing for the two of them to receive the invitation. We will leave it, then, at the professors and old Mr van Zestien. That, as you rightly point out, will relieve us of our social obligations.’

‘I wish awful old Rebekah Rose was coming,’ said Laura wistfully. ‘She’s almost too good to be true. Where does she live?’

‘I have no idea. I envisage a London flat, but I have nothing much to go on. In any case, I doubt whether she and her daughter would feel at home in rural Hampshire. Petra Rose did not seem to care for the salt marshes, mud and shingle of North Norfolk.’

The informally-worded invitations were sent off in due course and were answered promptly. The professors, it appeared, were delighted to accept and thought it very kind indeed of Dame Beatrice to remember them. They looked forward immensely to meeting her in London and visiting her clinic, and then driving with her to her country home. Their father, alas, was a little indisposed and was confined to his room. Again thanking Dame Beatrice and reiterating how much pleasure it would give them to renew their acquaintance with her, they remained hers most sincerely.

‘If they’re leaving Norfolk after lunch and coming by road,’ said Laura, ‘I should think they’d be in London in time for tea.’

This proved to be the case. The professors came in a hired, self-drive car and arrived, by way of the Norwich ring-road, Thetford and Newmarket, at exactly five o’clock. George immediately took charge of the hired car and garaged it, with Dame Beatrice’s own, safely beyond the ken of parking meters and traffic wardens (a service for which the professors were duly grateful), and Laura ushered them in.

As Henri and Célestine had been despatched to the Stone House in Hampshire to prepare for the arrival of the guests, there was nothing for it, Dame Beatrice observed to Laura, but to dine out. Over the dinner table Dame Beatrice asked for further news of the family. She had already made a civil enquiry as to the state of old Mr van Zestien’s health and had been told that it gave rise to no anxiety. He was seventy-eight and a little tired, that was all.

‘The family?’ repeated Sweyn, to whom the question

was addressed. (Laura and Derde were deep in a discussion — or, more accurately, a dissertation by the learned professor — on the magic books of the Aztecs). ‘Unfortunately they are at sixes and sevens. What does that mean, I wonder? It is a splendid saying. Odds and evens, evens and odds, would you say?’

‘According to the 1895 edition of the *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* compiled by the Reverend Doctor of Laws, E. Cobham Brewer,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘it means, as you indicate, ill-assorted; not matched; higgledy-piggledy.’

‘Higgledy-piggledy! What a delightful word! Permit me to record it. I have not met it before. One pictures the old-fashioned methods of pig-rearing, with infant swine, already weaned, climbing on one another’s backs and pushing one another out of the way in a squealing determination to obtain a major share of nourishment from the trough.’

He recorded the idiom in a slim notebook.

‘Spoken of things, (I quote)’ went on Dame Beatrice, ‘it means “in confusion;” spoken of persons, it means “in disagreement or hostility.” From the same source one learns that in Taylor’s *Workes*, published in 1630, “Old Odcombs odness makes thee not uneven, nor carelessly set all at six and seven.” The Hebrews, according to the Reverend Doctor, also had a word for it — “six, yea seven,” meaning an indefinite number. There is a reference to the phrase in the Book of Job.’

‘I am infinitely obliged to you, Dame Beatrice, for your most clear and charming explanation. But “higgledy-piggledy” I like best. As for the family, after whom you so kindly enquire, well, there, I fear, we are indeed at sixes and sevens. The understanding between Binnie and Bernardo does not flourish, and my father is so angry, in consequence, that he has made a new will leaving everything to be divided between Florian and myself. I have remonstrated with him, but to no effect.

Certainly the fortune (it will be a very large one, even when halved like this) would be of enormous benefit to my brother and myself, for we could then afford to give up our teaching posts at our universities and devote ourselves to original work, to research studies, to travel, but I dislike the rearrangement which robs Binnie and Bernardo.'

'You did not mention whether your brother was included in the will.'

'Whatever includes me includes my brother,' said Sweyn simply. 'Then, when Florian heard that I approached my father with a view to getting the wording of the will restored to what it was, he became extremely angry with me and reproached me, with much bad language, and asserted that I was attempting to go behind his back to rob him of his inheritance.'

'Oh, dear!'

'My brother,' went on Sweyn, 'was to have been named co-inheritor with Florian, but he angered my father by telling him that the quarrel between Bernardo and Binnie was their own business and that of nobody else. However, my father is well aware that it makes no difference whether Derde or I inherit, because we shall share the money, therefore his anger is but a token of parental authority. If he were really angry, he would disinherit both of us.' He smiled. Dame Beatrice asked:

'Are Binnie and Florian still living with their grand-uncle?'

'Binnie went back to Scotland with her parents. She and Florian quarrelled bitterly over the broken engagement. She blames him for it and, I am sure, would like to be re-engaged to Bernardo if her pride permitted. Florian is still living with my father, but how long he will stay I do not know. He has further sittings to the sculptor in Amsterdam.'

'And Mrs Rebekah Rose?'

'Ah, that one!' exclaimed Sweyn, with deep feeling.

‘And yet, you know, her daughter Petra has had several excellent offers of marriage, but she prefers (and I believe that is *le mot juste*) she *prefers* to live with that entirely outrageous old woman. Of course,’ he added, ‘there is money in that family. Nathan Rose, husband to Rebekah and father to Sigismund and Petra, was what I believe you call in England a very warm man, and it is known that Rebekah is an extremely wealthy woman. All the same, she is quite likely to leave everything to Sigismund and her other son who is living in America, and not to allow Petra anything more than a nominal share in the fortune. Philip (in America) and Sigismund were left something in their father’s will. The daughter Sarah (also in America) and Petra got nothing at all. The bulk of the fortune went to Rebekah and she has added to it. The family, you see, has always been a matriarchy. This, I believe, is not uncommon in Jewish households.’

‘Yes,’ said Derde, who was in conversation with Laura, ‘the maize was worshipped as a god by the Mexicans. They called him Cinteotl and he is represented in their magic books as a spirit with a flowering maize plant on his head. It gives him a mass of yellow hair and represents the bearded strands one notices on corn on the cob.’

‘One is reminded of the Hiawatha legend,’ said Dame Beatrice, breaking away from the family ramifications of the Colwyn-Welch tribe, the van Zestiens and the Jewish Roses, since, intriguing though these were, she did not wish to push confidences too far. The conversation turned upon magic in general and, upon this topic, everybody had something to say. Then magic turned to superstition and superstition to ghosts. In other words, the dinnerparty became lively and lasted long.

On the following morning George brought round the hired car and what Laura called “Mrs Croc.’s stately limousine” and Dame Beatrice, Laura and the guests set

out for the Stone House. They lunched in Winchester so that the professors might see the ancient city — its school, its water-meadows, the river, Jane Austen's house, the St Cross almshouses, the Cathedral, its Close, and the prehistoric fort on St Catherine's Hill — and drove on to Southampton and Lyndhurst and made a détour through part of the New Forest. Then they took the road which led to Wandles Parva.

Laura's policeman husband came to dinner at the Stone House and stayed the night, but had to leave early on the following morning for a conference with an Assistant Commissioner. Laura rose at seven and breakfasted with him and then saw him off at soon after half-past eight. She went for a stroll and returned in time to waylay the village postman on his way to the Stone House.

'I'll take the letters, if you like,' she said. The postman, whose round covered a good many miles, accepted her offer gratefully, but seemed a little doubtful about giving her two letters addressed to Professor Derde van Zestien.

'Oh, that's all right,' said Laura. 'He's a Dutch professor and is staying here for a day or two. His brother is with him. I should have thought it was all over the village by now.'

She carried the letters up to the house and found the other three at breakfast. She looked through the correspondence she was holding, put some of it beside her own plate, for a place had been laid for her — it was known that she liked a second breakfast when she had been out for a morning walk or a swim — gave one envelope to Dame Beatrice and the last two to Derde.

Derde glanced at the two envelopes, and then passed them across to his brother. Sweyn examined them and then pushed them aside.

'I prefer my kidneys and bacon,' he said, 'to be eaten in peace, before I deal with letters from my relatives.'

One, I see, is from my father,' he added to Dame Beatrice, 'and the other is from Florian. We will look at them closely later.'

'Yes, later,' agreed Derde. They read the letters after breakfast, passing them from one to the other without comment. In an ante-room Laura was busy with some typing. Dame Beatrice, in conference with her servants, was arranging for lunch and dinner. She returned to the library, where she had left the brothers, in time to hear Derde say:

'Well, we cannot blame Florian. Naturally he is interested in this sculpture and this painting. Most young men are in love with themselves. Why not? Florian is an irritating boy, but, then, who is *not* irritating at that age? — except to his contemporaries, and, sometimes, even to them.'

'Very true,' said Sweyn. 'Ah, Dame Beatrice!' They rose. 'Our letters are causing us just a little concern. My father is distressed because Florian has left his house very suddenly for the Netherlands. We have also heard from Florian himself. He goes to our aunt and cousins so that his bust and a portrait of his hand may be finished. He admits that he went on impulse and that my father is angry with him.'

'A portrait of his hand?' said Dame Beatrice. 'I noticed that he has exquisite hands, but I had not heard that one was to be painted.'

'Yes. I have not seen the artist's studies, but I believe that in the picture Florian's right hand is to be shown holding a hyacinth called the Delft Blue. It is a noble inflorescence and of the same colour as his eyes. One wonders why not a complete portrait. That would be more interesting, I think.'

'He is a very handsome boy,' said Dame Beatrice, non-committally.

'Beautiful rather than handsome,' amended Sweyn. 'He is indeed rather like a flower, and that gives his

appearance a degree of femininity which, one supposes, must be foreign to his nature.'

'One supposes Narcissus,' said Derde.

Dame Beatrice thought it better not to comment upon this obvious truth.

'I wonder whether there is anything in particular you would like to do after lunch?' she said.

'I should like to see more of the New Forest,' said Sweyn.

'And I should like to visit the docks at Southampton,' said Derde, smiling.

'Both plans can be carried out, if we have an early lunch,' said Dame Beatrice. 'I will order the car for half-past one. George can take us first to Southampton and then we can come back by way of Lyndhurst and Emery Down. From there, if you liked, Laura could guide you if you wished to take a walk. Walking is quite the best way, I think, to enjoy and savour the Forest.'

These arrangements were carried out and gave great pleasure to the professors, pleasure which was destined to be short-lived, for a telegram awaited them at the Stone House.

'Oh, dear!' exclaimed Dame Beatrice, when Derde handed it to her. 'I am very sorry indeed.'

'So are we,' said Sweyn. 'Apart from the news that my father is really ill, it means that we must cut short our visit, I am afraid. It seems that our place is with him.'

'Hm!' said Laura, when the farewells had been made early on the following morning and the brothers had driven off in their hired car. 'I like them, but they *are* a bit heavy in the hand, don't you think? At Southampton yesterday we were treated to the history of the port of Antwerp, (which isn't even in Holland), and on the New Forest walk I heard all about the *fauna* and *flora* of the Dutch East Indies — interesting, but I found it fatiguing.'

‘I found them quite charming,’ said Dame Beatrice. There was a telegram from Derde on the following day.

MY FATHER SERIOUSLY ILL LETTER FOLLOWS.

‘I hope the old gentleman’s illness is not as serious as the telegram would lead us to suppose,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘I should think he’s pretty bad. The Dutch are a stolid sort of people and, in any case, I don’t see the professors sending windy telegrams all over the place. I should say they take the placid, academic view of things.’

‘I thought you had read Sir Charles Snow’s *The Masters*! There seemed little placidity in *their* academic circle, unless I misunderstood the story.’

A fortnight passed. Dame Beatrice and Laura returned to London to put in three days a week at the psychiatric clinic and to go down to Hampshire to stay at the Stone House from Thursday evenings until early on Tuesday mornings. It was on a Saturday that the promised letter came from Derde.

‘My father seems a little stronger, but we have not liked to tell him the latest family vexation. From my telegram of a fortnight ago you will realise that we found my father very ill indeed, the result, it seems, of shock. We were sufficiently alarmed to send for his sister, my aunt Binnen. She is here with my cousins, and my sister Maarte and her husband are also with us.

‘We can suggest no cause for shock except the sudden departure of Florian. My father will not have his name mentioned in his presence, and, indeed, it is just as well, for, to the distress of my aunt and cousins, Florian left their house as abruptly as he left this one, and has disappeared. For fear that my father should die, Florian must be found and brought back here so that a reconciliation may be brought about. My father is very fond of the boy and could be persuaded, I am sure, to forgive him.

‘My brother and I are wondering whether you could possibly spare the time to come along and give us the benefit of your advice and experience, as you are a psychiatrist and will be able to explain to us why Florian should act in this unaccountable way.

‘We have advertised in Dutch. English, Austrian and Italian papers for him, but, so far, without result.’

‘Well, well, well!’ said Laura, when she had read the letter. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘I shall go at once to Norfolk, child. This is a cry from the heart and cannot be disregarded. Put off everybody who *can* be put off, and refer the rest to Doctor Anderson.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

Concern about the Dispossessed

‘It occurs to me that you may care to investigate the matter with me. If so, send me a wire when to expect you.’

E. and H. Heron



You think there’s some connection between Florian’s disappearance and this gathering of the clans, don’t you?’ said Laura, as they drove northwards on the following morning. ‘I mean, it isn’t *only* the old chap’s illness.’

‘I think that Professor Derde is an extremely worried man,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I esteem him very highly and I should like to help him. In what way I can do so is in doubt until I meet him again, but the least I can do is to go and see him. After all, he is an authority on the Aztecs of Mexico, is he not?’

‘What’s that got to do with it?’ asked Laura. Dame Beatrice waved a yellow explanatory hand.

‘Human sacrifices, dear child, appear to have been a feature of their religion.’

‘You mean that Florian’s *dead*?’

‘After death there is no other accident,’ pronounced Dame Beatrice. ‘That is what the Greeks thought, and I doubt whether there are many theologians today who would refuse to bear them out. I am always suspicious when persons who have what are sometimes called “expectations” vanish without trace. Why the Austrian and Italian papers, I wonder?’

‘I thought Florian’s expectations had gone overboard,’ said Laura. After lunching in Great Yarmouth, they arrived at Bernard van Zestien’s house at four o’clock, having stayed for a while on the front at Sheringham.

Derde met them at the door.

‘I’ve been looking down the drive for the past hour,’ he said. ‘I am so very glad to see you. It is good of you to come. An English tea is laid in the library.’

When you are refreshed, I will tell you all I know or can guess.'

The library was a spacious, handsome room with a carved overmantel attributed to Grinling Gibbons, (but more likely to have been the work of one of his pupils), a remarkable painted ceiling and windows which overlooked two sides of the park. The books were neither numerous nor noteworthy. In fact, two shelves were given over to modern novels, detective stories and tales of adventure, these to suit the taste, Dame Beatrice concluded, of Florian and Binnie.

A maid, with the flat features and small, intelligent eyes of so many of the East Anglian peasantry, served tea, at which the visitors were joined by Derde and Sweyn. The latter, it was soon clear, did not share his elder brother's fears and anxieties.

'Ten to one,' he said, when tea had been cleared away and the party were seated round the fire, 'Florian, having slipped across to Holland so that his portrait bust can be finished, merely is staying there because he intends to have the work photographed and to send copies of the photograph to the prospective publishers of his book.'

'He is an author, then?' said Dame Beatrice. 'What is his line? Has he a special interest?'

'He is preparing a work which describes the limestone caves and grottoes of the South Limburg province. I think that he also has chapters on the Cheddar Gorge in England, and those grottoes in Priddy and the Mendip Hills. So I *think*, but I doubt whether it is a very good book. In any case, although he calls himself an author, none of his work has, as yet, been published.'

'But you do not know for certain whether or not he has left Holland?'

'We do not know. We have no idea, and neither has our aunt Binnen. Cousin Opal looks wise but says little, except that he may be in the Dolomites.'

'Why are you so worried about him, Professor?' demanded Dame Beatrice, addressing Derde.

'I hardly know. He is a foolish boy, very sure that he knows everything. All the same, if he had seen our notices in the newspapers, I am sure that he would have come to his granduncle's bedside.'

'What do you want me to do? He seems to have been thoughtless, but young people are like that. Is there nothing else you would like to tell me?'

Sweyn scowled at the toes of his shoes. Derde glanced at his brother and then said:

'None of us likes his attitude towards his sister's engagement.'

‘But I understood that the engagement had been broken off.’

‘I think Time will heal that little breach,’ said Sweyn, raising his head and fixing his light-coloured eyes on those of Dame Beatrice. Hers were as black as coals and her whole expression was non-committal.

‘It would do a great deal to relieve all our minds,’ said Derde, ‘if you would undertake to find Florian and persuade him to return to his duty. We would pursue the quest ourselves, but the University term begins very shortly and we must be in our places at least a week beforehand, for there is much to do at the beginning of a new College year.’

‘Yes, I see. May I have Miss Binnie Colwyn-Welch’s address? I believe she is in Scotland with her parents. I take it that the family reunion does not include them.’

Derde wrote down the address and then said:

‘I wonder how you guessed that we had not sent for Binnie and her parents?’

‘I concluded that Binnie’s parents would be too busy with the management of their hotels to come south again unless the news of Mr van Zestien’s health was even worse than it is, and Binnie would hardly come without them unless she was fully reconciled with Mr Bernardo Rose. That reconciliation, I gather, has not come about.’

‘It would, if only they could be brought together,’ said Sweyn. ‘You will like to visit my father after dinner? He will be pleased.’

They were taken to his room shortly after the meal was over. The old man’s breathing was a matter for concern and he seemed to find it difficult to speak. Fortunately there was very little he wanted to say. It was evident he had been told that Dame Beatrice had been asked to look for Florian.

‘Find him,’ he said, ‘and tell him that he is still a grandnephew of mine. He has done wrong, but please find him, if you can. I must punish him, but I love him very dearly.’

‘The Lord loveth whom He chasteneth,’ said Dame Beatrice absently. She took her leave, as she added, ‘We shall do our best, and will let you have news.’

She and Laura left North Norfolk immediately after breakfast on the following morning, lunched in Boston and dined and spent the night in Durham. Binnie’s parents not only owned but were the resident managers of a large hotel just north of Peebles on the road to Penicuik. It was their latest and most ambitious venture. Rooms for Laura and Dame Beatrice had been booked by telephone from Norfolk and Binnie herself was at the reception desk when they arrived. She greeted them effusively and begged them to stay ‘a good long time.’

‘But we’ve only booked for one night,’ said Laura, signing the book after Dame Beatrice had had it.

‘Oh, that doesn’t matter. We’re not full. It would be so nice to have you for a bit. I could take you out and show you the countryside, you know. We could go in to Peebles sometimes. There’s a big hydro. there where there’s dancing and all kinds of entertainment. I know the manager. He’s an awfully nice person. I’m only looking after the office here because I get so bored doing nothing. Look here, let me show you your rooms and so forth, and then you must join me for a cocktail and tell me all that’s been happening since I saw you last. Mac, dear,’ she added to the porter, who had been hovering over the travellers’ luggage, ‘numbers seven and eight.’ The porter went off and Dame Beatrice followed. Laura would have done the same, but Binnie detained her. ‘I say,’ she muttered, ‘why have you come?’

‘You’d better ask Dame B.,’ returned Laura.

‘So there *is* something behind your visit! I guessed as much when we got Uncle Derde’s telephone message booking the rooms for you. Is it — well, you might as well tell me — is it anything to do with Bernardo?’

‘No,’ said Laura, ‘it is not.’

‘I haven’t heard from him since we broke it off, you know. I do wish he’d write. Of course, he’s proud and obstinate and he expects me to be the one to give in, and I always have, but this time I don’t see why I should. After all, he did hit poor Florian. I think he ought to climb down and offer me back the ring. I’d take it soon enough, if only he’d make the first move. It’s rotten here, with none of my friends, and Mummy and Daddy always so busy and, anyway, almost strangers to me.’

‘Hard luck,’ said Laura automatically. She got away and mounted the stairs. The porter was waiting to point out her room. Laura tipped him and walked over to the window. There was a fine view of the hills surrounding Peebles and Laura felt, with Binnie, that it was a pity to be making merely an overnight stay. She bathed and changed and then tapped on the door of number seven. Dame Beatrice was ready to go downstairs.

‘Binnie seems under the weather about her broken engagement,’ remarked Laura. ‘Which of them do *you* suppose ought to make the first move? Dashed if *I* would, if Gavin and I had a row of that sort, but perhaps she *was* a bit precipitate, chucking the ring at Bernardo like that. Of course, nobody wants to see a brother get manhandled, I suppose. All the same, she herself went for him later and blamed him for the broken engagement.’

‘Do you and our dear Robert ever quarrel?’ asked Dame Beatrice, interested because she had never thought of this before.

‘Oh, yes, of course we do. It isn’t healthy not to. We fight like fiends — literally — and then it always strikes us as funny and we begin to laugh. It’s ever such a good scrap while it lasts and we both enjoy it lots, but once you’ve laughed you’ve had it. Such a pity! I do love a really splendid maul.’

Dame Beatrice clucked sympathetically. Then she said,

‘I take it that Binnie knows nothing of Florian’s disappearance?’

‘I hardly think she does. She’s such a prattling, ingenuous little headache that she’d have babbled it out at once.’

Dame Beatrice agreed with this judgment and they went down to join Binnie in the cocktail lounge. She ordered, insisting that the drinks were on the house and therefore she would not have to pay for them, and then, when the drinks had been brought, she said:

‘Now, Dame Beatrice, do please tell me why you have come. Laura says it’s nothing to do with Bernardo, so I suppose it’s about Florian.’

‘What makes you think so?’ asked Dame Beatrice.

‘Well, it couldn’t be about anybody else, unless Grand-uncle has gone and died, and I should have heard about that from Grandma Binnen or Uncle Derde, shouldn’t I?’

‘It *is* about Florian,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Your uncles would have come themselves, but it is imperative that they go up to their Universities quite soon, and so they felt that they could not spare the time for extensive travel.’

‘That’s a stock excuse of theirs if there’s any family hoo-ha on hand,’ said Binnie. ‘They’re typical dons. They simply loathe getting mixed up in anything except their own work. Uncle Sweyn is worse than Uncle Derde. Uncle D. does at least have *some* conscience about the family, but Uncle Sweyn is too *utterly* self-centred and unreliable.’

‘It is true that Professor Sweyn did not seem as concerned as Professor Derde,’ admitted Dame Beatrice.

‘Concerned? About Florian?’

‘Your brother appears to have given the family the slip. They would like to know where he is.’

‘Oh, but I know where he is. He’s in Holland, staying with Grandma Binnen and the awful aunts.’

‘He called on them, certainly, but left them for an unknown destination,’ said Laura.

‘And, in any case, they are now in England,’ added Dame Beatrice.

‘But he went over there to give a last sitting for that silly bust and that idiotic flower,’ exclaimed Binnie. ‘If he isn’t over here with the family, where is he? He hasn’t any friends over there and he hasn’t any money for lodgings. What does Granduncle van Zestien think about it?’

Laura glanced at Dame Beatrice, who replied:

‘He is ill and has taken your brother’s defection very badly.’

‘You mean he’s disinherited him,’ said Binnie, with another flash of the acumen she occasionally and unexpectedly displayed. ‘That’s the nub of it, isn’t it? Oh, well, that means Bernardo will be reinstated, so that the sooner I reinstate myself with Bernardo the better it will be for all concerned. I only wish I knew how to do it without actually climbing down.’

‘Well! The little gold-digger!’ exclaimed Laura, as she and her employer took their seats at a table for two at dinner. ‘Makes you wonder whether she chucked poor old Bernardo with an eye to settling down to housekeep for Florian, who hated the engagement anyway.’

Dame Beatrice did not play to this gambit. She appeared to be studying the menu. Neither did she return to the subject during dinner. They retired early and Laura was up at seven on the following morning and out of the hotel by half-past. It was her custom to take an early walk if the countryside seemed to justify this exercise. Upon her return she ran into Binnie, who was taking the air on the tennis courts which fronted her parents’ hotel.

‘Oh, hullo,’ said the daughter of the house. ‘Good-morning! Have you been for a walk? If you had let me know, I’d have come with you. I expect you’re ready for breakfast. Dame Beatrice had hers half-an-hour ago, and now she’s writing some letters or something. I’ve had my breakfast, too, but I can come and gossip to you while you have yours, if you like.’

‘I never talk at breakfast,’ said Laura, alarmed. ‘That’s why Dame B. and I always breakfast separately.’

Both these statements were divorced from the truth, but, to Laura’s relief, they were instrumental in fobbing off Binnie, who looked disappointed, and said moodily,

‘Oh, well, if you don’t want me, I’ll go into the office and type out the menu for lunch. You’re staying for lunch, I suppose?’

Truthfully, (this time), Laura replied that she had not the faintest idea. Thankfully she went in to breakfast, at which, famishingly hungry, she consumed fruit juice, porridge, poached egg on finnan haddie, bacon and fried

potatoes, bannocks, butter, Dundee marmalade and three cups of coffee. Greatly restored, she joined Dame Beatrice, whom she discovered in the lounge, and asked when they were proposing to leave.

‘Not today, at any rate,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I have sent to Mr Bernardo Rose to join us here. Until I receive a reply from him, I am afraid that we are obliged to stay.’

‘Good-o,’ said Laura. ‘I like it here. I do wish we weren’t quite so supersaturated with Binnie, though. She gets on my nerves. All the same, there’s more in the wretched kid than meets the eye. Wish I could stand her, but I can’t.’

‘Not only punctuality, but also patience, is the politeness of princes, child.’

Bernardo arrived three days later, having made the journey (in one hop from his London home, as he expressed it) as soon as he could make arrangements about his work.

‘Work?’ said Laura. Binnie, who had openly flouted the young man when he arrived by pointedly handing over the register to the official receptionist, replied:

‘Oh, yes, he works for his father, my uncle Sigismund Rose. You met him and Auntie Maarte in Norfolk. They’re diamond merchants, same as Granduncle. That’s why I know Bernardo got my ring on the cheap, and that’s one of the reasons why I threw it back at him. I think people ought to *pay* for diamonds. Don’t you?’ she added, turning to Dame Beatrice.

Dame Beatrice replied that she had never looked at the matter in that light, but that she could see there was something in what Binnie said.

‘It’s not as though he couldn’t afford it,’ Binnie went on. ‘He’s got plenty of money. Of course, I’d be glad to marry into Granduncle’s fortune. I’m not saying I wouldn’t. And I would like...’ At this point she burst into tears.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Of course you would, and I think it will come about. Mr Bernardo is a reasonable young man.’

‘Although whether he’s picked the right girl,’ said Laura, ‘is anybody’s guess, and mine would probably be wrong. I hope so, anyway, for both their sakes.’

‘You do not think they would make a happy couple?’ Dame Beatrice enquired.

‘I should think he’d murder Binnie long before the first baby came,’ said Laura. Bernardo joined them for cocktails. Binnie chose that evening to act as barmaid.

‘One sherry, (dry), one whisky undiluted, one lemon shandy because I never drink wine or spirits, and thank you miss,’ said Bernardo, smiling into the eyes

of his erstwhile beloved.

‘Oh, Bernie darling!’ wailed Binnie, drooping towards him over the bar counter.

‘Now, now, come, come! You can’t do that there here,’ said Bernardo reasonably. ‘People will think I’ve refused to make an honest woman of you, or something.’

True to form, Binnie turned a hiccupping sob into a sudden giggle and handed him a small tray on which to place the drinks he had ordered. She poured them out, dried her eyes on the cloth which was used to wipe the bar counter and then drew some beer for herself and emptied the rest of the bottle of lemonade into it. She picked up the glass.

‘*Morgen*,’ she said.

‘*Vanvond*,’ contradicted Bernardo. Binnie gave a little shriek.

‘*Zestien*,’ she said. Bernardo looked pained.

‘Is that the hour or the room number?’ he enquired. ‘I ask because, as neither of us happens to be surnamed Zestien, (unlike our near relatives), I can only imagine that you mean *Sixteen*. Or is that, by any chance, your age? You certainly don’t *look* any more than that. And as for your behaviour...’ He smiled at her again, and took the glass out of her hand.

‘Oh, Bernie, is it *really* all on again?’ asked Binnie. For answer Bernardo felt in a pocket, drew out the engagement ring, took her left hand and slipped the sign and token of his intentions on to the required finger.

‘He’s a long time getting those drinks,’ said Laura.

‘I do not think it is time wasted, though,’ said Dame Beatrice, who, from her seat in the alcove they had chosen, could see the bar counter, whereas Laura could not. ‘An affecting little scene of reconciliation is taking place. Ah, here comes our cavalier now.’

‘With nods and becks and wreathed smiles, too,’ said Laura, when he came within her orbit, ‘so I feel you must be right.’

‘So now?’ said Bernardo, when he had set down the drinks and seated himself. ‘Cheers! And on two counts. More important, the drinks themselves. Less important, (but I shall hope for your felicitations), my engagement appears to be on again. But let’s not worry about that. May I be allowed to know what lies behind your request that I should join you here?’

‘Well, you do know,’ replied Laura, grinning. ‘Dame B’s *alter alias* is The Marriage Mender.’

‘It does not fit with the general situation for you and Binnie to be estranged

any longer,' said Dame Beatrice. 'She may need you badly in the foreseeable future. Her brother has disappeared, as, of course, you know.'

'Disappeared? Oh, I wouldn't let that worry you. I'orian always was a melodramatic young ass. It's just a stunt of his to attract attention to himself.'

'Professor Derde van Zestien does not seem to think so. He is sufficiently worried to have asked us to look for him.'

'Uncle Derde's a spinsterish nit-wit. What does Uncle Sweyn think?'

'He does not seem particularly concerned.'

'Well, there you are, then. Are you going over to Holland, or what?'

'We are going first to talk with Mrs Colwyn-Welch from whose house the disappearance took place. It was from her, of course, that the news came.'

'Well, yes, it would be, and I must admit that it's not like old Great-aunt Binnen to panic. When did you think of going? Look here, perhaps I can save you a journey. I've got to see a man in Amsterdam. I was over there a few days ago, but he wasn't available, so it's inevitable I go again soon. I could step up the time and be off the day after tomorrow. What do you think?'

'Very kind and thoughtful of you,' said Dame Beatrice, in her mellowest tones, 'but I shall enjoy the trip — that is, if it proves necessary to go to Holland at all.'

Binnie, having found one of the staff who could look after the bar, came over and joined them. She placed both hands on the table so that the engagement ring could be seen without difficulty.

'Do let me stand the next round,' she said. 'We've got two things to celebrate. One is the engagement being on again, and the other is that Dame Beatrice and darling Laura are going to find Florian and make him come home.'

'Why should anyone bother?' asked Bernardo.

CHAPTER NINE

Speculation about a Troglodyte

‘Ah, wretched and too solitary he
Who loves not his own company.’

Abraham Cowley



Why Bernardo’s unselfish desire to save us a journey?’ enquired Laura, that evening. ‘It didn’t strike me as being quite in character. What did *you* think?’

‘That it was an unselfish desire to save us a journey, child.’

Laura glowered at her employer suspiciously and changed the subject — changed it, at any rate, to some extent.

‘How do we go about bearding Mrs Colwyn-Welch?’ she asked.

‘Face to face, man to man and with what is called brutal frankness,’ Dame Beatrice replied.

‘*Not* the wisdom of the serpent and the venom (or what have you) of the dove? I loathe that awful cooing noise doves make. It makes me think of Early Victorian wives bleating to their husbands for another farthing.’

‘Farthings are no longer legal currency,’ said Dame Beatrice, as though she was thinking of something else. This was, in fact, the case. ‘I wonder how ill old Mr van Zestien really is?’ she added, indicating in what direction her thoughts were moving.

‘Got a touch of the spleen because Florian hopped it out of his house to push over to Holland, I thought we were told,’ said Laura. ‘Isn’t that how it strikes you, then?’

‘It may well be the right answer. Wealthy old gentlemen often do expect to rule the lives of those who may benefit by their deaths. However, one never knows, and, that being the case, one wishes to refrain from judging.’

‘Tell me what you really think,’ urged Laura. ‘You believe that Florian’s dead, don’t you? And that old van Zestien knows it?’

‘Dear me!’ said Dame Beatrice, in mild and faintly astonished tones.

‘Accustomed as I am to your West Scottish acumen, sometimes known as second sight, or, in the vernacular, as having the Gift, the extraordinary conclusion to which you have leapt confounds and amazes me.’

‘Ah, I thought I knew,’ said Laura, looking modestly down her nose. ‘You can’t fool poor old Auntie Dog the whole of the time, you know. So we go corpse-hunting, do we?’

‘Really!’ said Dame Beatrice, with an eldritch screech of laughter which, together with her royal blue and sulphur costume, almost over-emphasized her resemblance to a macaw. ‘Nothing is further from my thoughts, and, from the zestful tone of your question, nobody would think that the unfortunate young man to whom you refer was an acquaintance of yours!’

‘I didn’t take to him,’ said Laura soberly. ‘I didn’t take to him at all.’

‘No, he is — or, as you prefer to put it, *was* — a less than endearing character. Nevertheless...’ She did not attempt to finish the sentence. There was silence until Laura said:

‘Well, be all that as it may, having sorted Binnen, where do we go from there?’

‘It all depends upon what she is able to tell us. Then, of course, her daughters may know more than she does.. Again, we have the name of the sculptor from whom the bust was commissioned. He may well have been in Florian’s confidence. A curious kind of sympathy often exists between sitter and artist. Indeed, I think it must be so if the work is to be a success. I use the word *sympathy* in its widest possible sense. I am prepared to believe that the artist could hate the sitter and still produce a work of genius.’

‘But, in that case, they would hardly confide in one another,’ argued Laura.

‘Hatred — a clean, untroubled, intellectual emotion vastly removed from envy, jealousy, abhorrence or disgust — is closely akin to love, as we are often reminded. One thinks of various poems. There is one by Herbert Palmer which begins, if you remember:

I hated a fellow-man long ago, but when he heard that his enemy was dead — my heart was heavy, and gave no sound. And there are other, even more emphatic, instances.’

‘Hm! Not sure that I see eye to eye. All the same, you think this Albion, the artist, may know more about Florian than the family do? That’s more than possible, especially if, far from hating each other, they got on quite well together. I think they must have done. I can’t see Florian putting himself out, and going for sittings and so forth, just to oblige Binnen. And, of course, Opal and Ruby he

absolutely despises and detests. Can't say I'm gone on them myself. Wonder what their father was like? They don't somehow seem to take after Binnen, do they?'

'It does not seem so, but, in fairness, we must admit that we have enjoyed only the most superficial acquaintance with them.'

'I can't say I've enjoyed it, and, in any case, I always rely on first impressions.'

'And those, unlike second thoughts, are best, I have always found. Nevertheless, when we have spoken with their mother, we must consult them.'

'Separately?'

'Separately. It is the only way to examine witnesses.'

'Yes,' said Laura thoughtfully. She was silent for a full minute, a silence into which nothing but the discreet ticking of the lounge clock intruded itself. 'Yes, why am I so certain that Florian is dead, I wonder?'

'Because Professor Derde van Zestien thinks he is,' Dame Beatrice replied. 'Well, we have done what we set out to do in Scotland, so tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new.'

They left at ten. Frank and Flora Colwyn-Welch saw them off and seemed unimpressed by old Bernard's illness and their son's disappearance. There was no sign of Binnie, but Bernardo, his overnight bag at his feet, was loitering in the vestibule. He came forward when the farewells were concluded.

'Awful cheek on my part,' he said, 'but I wondered whether... ?'

'Of course. You may sit next to George,' said Dame Beatrice at once. 'Then, if I want to talk secrets with Laura, I have only to close the glass screen.'

'It's awfully good of you.' He saw them into the car, greeted George pleasantly and got in beside him. He insisted upon paying for lunch, but left them at Harrogate, where they were to spend the night. 'I'd better get back home,' he explained. 'Got a big deal on tomorrow afternoon. There's a train at ten past six which will bring me into London in time to beg a doss-down from a friend of mine who's got a handy flat. Thanks very much indeed for the lift.'

'Well, he's nice enough,' said Laura, when they had dropped him at the station and were driving back to the hotel, 'but I don't mind seeing the back of him, all the same. Wonder what happened to Binnie, that she didn't see us off?'

'I expect she was tired after the affecting reconciliation with Bernardo,' said Dame Beatrice. Laura snorted suspiciously.

'Out on the tiles with him, I suppose you mean,' she said bluntly. 'One would never think these girls read the sob-stuff page in the women's magazines, would

one? And I'm quite sure most of them do.'

'Ah, those women's magazines!' said Dame Beatrice. 'I remember that you have recommended them to me before. I am sure, however, that Bernardo is a man of honour.'

'Prepared and willing to Right the Wrong?'

'I very much doubt whether wrong has been done, in this particular instance.'

'What makes you think that?'

'Because, although Bernardo, by nature and by training, has learnt to keep his own counsel, Binnie has not, and one breath of premarital experiment in the ears of old Mr van Zestien, and...'

'Bang goes Bernardo's chance of keeping his present place in the old man's will? Oh, yes, I quite see that. Reformed Dutch Church, and so forth. Highly moral, and easily shocked.'

'Well, unless my observations have led me sadly astray, Bernardo is not the man to risk losing a fortune for the passing, ephemeral joy...'

'Of going to bed with Binnie? How right you are. Of course, she might have gone out for a walk this morning. I must confess, though, that, although I didn't particularly want to see her, I was a bit dashed to find she wasn't there.'

'You will see her again soon enough.'

'Where? In Norfolk?'

'I think so. Bernardo, I feel certain, will leap back to his grandfather's bedside as soon as his business in London is concluded, and Binnie will be there to greet him.'

'And make sure of the old man's special blessing, I suppose!'

'Really, my dear Laura! Your cynicism unnerves me!' protested Dame Beatrice, with an eldritch scream of laughter which gave the lie to her words.

'Reverting to a former subject of conversation, though,' she went on, with apparent inconsequence, 'what would you now say was the feeling of Florian for his aunts Opal and Ruby?'

'That's an easy one. Ruby was scared of him, Opal doted on him, and he loathed both of them equally.'

'Yes, it did appear to be like that. He seemed fated to sit next to Opal at table, I noticed. That might have been pre-arranged by the givers of the feasts; but I also noticed that he slid into a chair beside Opal at breakfast on the morning following old Mr van Zestien's dinner-party, and I take it that there was no particular need for him to do that, since several people breakfasted in their

rooms, which meant that there were other vacant seats at table apart from the one he chose.'

'Sometimes the repugnant has its own attraction,' said Laura. 'Nothing could be more repugnant to me than Hamish, yet I not only put up with him, but secretly I have an old hen with one chick attitude towards him. Come to think of it' — she sighed deeply — 'I suppose that's just what I am. Of course, Florian may put up with his aunts because they're paying for the bust. I wonder who'll have it when it's finished?'

'Well, Binnen, and not the aunts, is paying for it. Ah, here we are, and I have no doubt that, in spite of your advanced years and cynical outlook, you are ready for your dinner.'

'And how! And I can't wait for tomorrow, to see you and Opal go to the mat together and bite pieces out of one another's ears!'

'Dear me! It sounds like your own line of country rather than mine. Conflict is abhorrent to me.'

Laura laughed.

'Most unfortunate!' she said. 'My trouble is that I can fight but I can't argue. Argument, I find, badly cramps my style. Left to myself, I prefer to step high, wide and plentiful, but Gavin, as you know, is the soul of tact, responsibility and decorum, and can argue the hind leg off a donkey. I tell him he lacks enterprise.'

'Oh, I wouldn't say that. Surely it was enterprising (and certainly rather bold) of him to talk you into marrying him?'

'There is that, I suppose. I still don't know why I caved in. I was perfectly happy as I was. I don't understand this female urge to be married. It was different when one stayed house-bound with aged, crotchety parents or had to go governing like those people in Compton Burnett.'

'You and I are the mothers of sons. England should be proud of us,' commented Dame Beatrice, with a leer.

'Scotland, in my case. And I don't see much to be proud of in having manufactured Hamish. I've often thought of getting him adopted.'

'May I be offered first refusal?'

Laura laughed. '

'He likes you much better than he does me, anyway,' she said.

'That is because he looks upon me as his great-grandmother. I am so many people's great-grandmother, in any case, that the part has become my own and I play it rather well.'

'If thoroughly spoiling all your great-grandchildren is the criterion, you

certainly do. Anyway, what part do you wish me to play in the forthcoming sorting of Florian's relatives?'

'I have no idea at the moment. We shall need to wait upon events.'

'Events being what you can chisel out of the assembled company about Florian's disappearance? Yes, of course. Beginning, I suppose, with his last visit to the Colwyn-Welch place in Amsterdam. Why are we staying the night in Harrogate? We could easily have pushed on into North Norfolk before bedtime.'

'We have been asked to lunch tomorrow, not to supper tonight.'

They arrived at Leyden Hall at half-past twelve on the following day and were taken into the drawing-room by Sweyn, who informed them that Derde was with his father in the State Bedroom, (so-called because Charles II was reputed have seduced a daughter of the house there), and that the other members of the family had gone shopping in Norwich, but would be back in time for lunch.

'And how is Mr van Zestien?' Dame Beatrice enquired.

'Considerably better. The sense of shock seems to be passing, but, of course, we have said nothing with regard to Florian's disappearance. Anyhow, he proposes to join us at the midday meal.'

'That is excellent news. Has nothing helpful come to light about your nephew?'

'Nothing at all. We have talked long and earnestly, but, I fear, fruitlessly, with Aunt Binnen and my cousins, but, beyond the fact that he vacated their home and did not return and left no message, we are exactly where we were when we first heard the news. I imagine you gained nothing of importance in Scotland? Binnie had no news of her brother?'

'She did not even know that he had disappeared. It may interest the family to learn, however, that the breach between her and Mr Bernardo is completely healed.'

'It will not only interest the family, it will delight my father. Are you sure of this? It would never do to disappoint him again.'

'I am perfectly sure it would not; I am equally sure that the engagement ring is again upon Binnie's finger and that she is both pleased and relieved to have it there.'

'I am delighted, so much so, in fact, that, with your permission, I will go at once and give my father the news.'

He went out of the enormous room by the door which opened on to the head of the first flight of stairs. Dame Beatrice looked at Laura, who was staring

fixedly at the extraordinary overmantel above the seventeenth century fireplace.

‘Abraham and Isaac at sacrifice, interrupted by a horrified-looking angel,’ she remarked. ‘It is an interesting interpretation of the story, is it not? For one thing, it appears that the patriarchs understood the mining of coal. Is it not coal which is piled on that neat and unobtrusive little wagon?’

‘It is. What’s more, Abraham is wearing the kilt, and that cloak thing of his is not unlike a plaid. How say you?’ asked Laura.

‘That the Lost Tribes must have come to Scotland before the Twelve Tribes themselves were in being. One can come to no other conclusion. As a work of art, though, what do you make of it?’

‘Dutch plasterwork done by a journeyman, and not too well, at that.’

‘Dutch? You see it as Dutch? Very interesting indeed,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Could be German, of course, but I fancy it’s Dutch,’ pursued Laura. ‘The angel looks extremely well-fed and could have been copied from something originally carved in wood. Those starting eyes are beautifully rendered. Moreover, they seem to me to have a slight squint. Yes, perhaps it *is* German, after all.’

Further discussion was interrupted by the entrance of Sweyn, Derde and the returned shoppers, followed by maids carrying trays of glasses and a decanter of sherry.

‘My father is delighted to have your good news,’ said Derde. ‘I was with him when my brother brought him the tidings. He is almost ready to join us and I am to take him to the dining-room as soon as we have had a drink.’

Dame Beatrice and Laura exchanged greetings with the others and when the gong was sounded for lunch Derde went to help his father downstairs and Binnen walked along the broad corridor with Dame Beatrice.

‘I suppose there is no news of Florian yet?’ asked the Dutchwoman. ‘Sweyn has just been telling me that you are to put your experience at our disposal. It is very good of you. Sit next to me at table. We shall be at the opposite end to my brother. You will tell me all that you can of Binnie. I understand that you saw her in Scotland.’

‘You will have heard that she is engaged to Bernardo again, no doubt?’

‘Yes, Sweyn did mention it.’ She paused at the head of the stairs. ‘Permit me. I must hold the banister rail. Living as I do in a ground-floor apartment, I am not so well accustomed to stairs as I used to be, and my eyesight is not what it was, and I hate wearing glasses.’

They gained the entrance hall and went into the dining-room. The others

followed them and in a short while Bernard joined them, leaning upon Derde. He shook hands with Dame Beatrice and Laura, and the company seated themselves. The old man had signed to Sweyn to pull out a chair for Dame Beatrice, but his sister forestalled this by saying,

‘It is my turn to have the company of Dame Beatrice at table, Bernard. You shall take Mrs Gavin instead. She will keep you amused, I am sure. Now,’ she went on, speaking to Dame Beatrice as soon as the soup had been served, ‘tell me all about your visit to Scotland, and then I shall tell you everything I can remember of Florian’s last visit to us in Amsterdam, for, if you are to search for him, you will need to know as much as possible.’

Dame Beatrice gave an account of the Scottish visit and added that Binnie had had no idea that her brother was missing.

‘No,’ said Binnen, ‘it was better not to tell her until we had decided what to do. How did she seem to take the news? She is inclined to be emotional. She is immature — very young for her age.’

‘She is only nineteen, I believe?’

‘That is so. However, at nineteen Opal was fully adult, Ruby not quite so much developed.’

Dame Beatrice, glancing from the monumental Opal to her weedy, querulous-looking sister, thought that their mother’s description fitted their physique no less than their mentality, but, naturally, she made no comment to this effect. She said:

‘How are they enjoying the visit to England, now that Mr van Zestien’s health has taken this turn for the better?’

‘Well enough. It makes a change for them. Their lives are dull, on the whole. The greatest treat they have, as a general rule, is a tour of the bulb-fields in the spring and attending the garlanded cars at the festival of flowers in May. I sent them to horticultural college when they were younger, but they did not seem to do very well. Their father was not much interested in bulbs and I suppose they take after him in that, although he died when they were children of nine and seven, so one cannot think that his tastes could influence theirs.’

‘So there are only two years between them?’

‘That is so. People are usually surprised when they find that out. They are very — how do you say? — thick together, and it has always been so. Opal leads and plans, and Ruby faithfully follows. There was a time when I thought Ruby might get married to another bulb-farmer whose fields march with mine on the Haarlem side, but nothing came of it. I always believe that Opal talked Ruby out

of it, but I was never told the inside story. Now Opal has this unhealthy fixation on Florian. One would be excused for thinking that he was her son. It irks the boy a good deal, but there is no doubt that he also basks in her love and admiration, although he has, at times, a very unsatisfactory way of showing it. Ruby, I think, is jealous of him, but she is too meek and too much under Opal's dominance to translate her feelings into any form of action.'

'Oh, really?' said Dame Beatrice, with a kindly leer. 'You interest me very much. There are, surely, not many mothers who can take so objective a view of their children?'

'Oh, well, I did not love my husband,' said Binnen, in matter-of-fact tones, 'and the girls in many ways take after him. Opal is like him in looks, Ruby in character. I dislike a spineless man, but I felt bound to marry him for my father's sake.'

'Indeed?' (Surely not the old, old Victorian melodrama of a daughter marrying money to save her father from ruin, thought Dame Beatrice).

'Yes, for my father's sake,' pursued Binnen. 'Bernard, my brother, early went into the diamond business, encouraged thereto by an uncle in South Africa. That left me as the representative of the bulbs. (I do not think that is very good English, but you understand me). The bulbs, you see, are family matters and the fields pass in inheritance, so I inherited ours. It was inevitable. Then comes trouble. Two bad years in succession. We need capital. My father borrows it. Comes a good year and we have success. Bad weather again, and we are not sufficiently recovered, so — I marry Francis Colwyn-Welch, who has money, and I put the bulbs on their feet again. My son Frank, father of Florian and Binnie, married the hotels, so I do not leave him the bulb-fields. Like his father and his sisters, he has no interest, and to do well with the bulbs it is necessary to love them very much. So Florian shall have them when I am gone. Is it true, think you, that nothing but the asphodel blooms in Heaven?'

Dame Beatrice made a reference to Mr P. G. Wode-house's Madeleine Bassett, who contended that the stars were God's daisy-chain, and Binnen broke into slightly throaty laughter. 'Daisies, to me, are not as attractive as asphodel,' she said. 'But I am to tell you about the visit of Florian to us. Well, there is so little to say. He comes, he gives the rest of the sittings, then, at my request, the sculptor agrees to paint his hand holding that hyacinth which we call, for your English trade, the Delft Blue, a lovely colour and a fine inflorescence. The sculptor dabbles also only a little in painting, and the hand with the flower is done quickly, but I shall like it. It will be, I think, very good. When it is

completed Florian tells us that he goes to continue his study of caves. We say goodbye, but he says, "Not goodbye. With permission, I leave my suitcase and return after I have been in Maastricht, Valkenburg and so on." I ask, "What about money?" He says he has money for hotel bills and Opal tells me later that she has lent him money for his fare. I do not believe her. Where would *she* get money to lend? I keep both my girls entirely dependent on me.'

'So you fully expected Mr Florian to come back because he had left his suitcase with you?'

'Indeed, so. But he did not return and then we had this news of my brother, so ill, so like to die. We come here, over to Norfolk, and still no word of Florian. What is to be done? He could not have money to last all this time. What may have happened? He is lost, one thinks, in a cave. He was so much devoted to caves.'

'Did you make any enquiries?'

'Many enquiries, but with no result. Perhaps you will fare better. How much I hope! He is a strange boy. Find him for us, that is what I ask. He comes to us, he goes away and there is no news. He knows, maybe, that my brother has taken away his inheritance and has given it to Bernardo. It is a mistake sometimes, these inheritances. Bad things are done because of them. First one young man to inherit and then another. Much riches. Much disappointment. Who knows what may happen?'

'And that is all you can tell me,' said Dame Beatrice. She said it in a tone of finality which did not brook any disclaimer. She felt certain that Binnen had told her everything she could.

CHAPTER TEN

Maastricht and Valkenburg Revisited

‘In a cavern, in a canyon,
Excavating for a mine,
Dwelt a miner, forty-niner.
And his daughter Clementine.’

Percy Montrose



Opal and Ruby, questioned separately by Dame Beatrice, (Laura cut off each sister in turn from the other by a pre-arrangement), added nothing to their mother’s report. Ruby was certain that Florian was lost in one of the labyrinths at Maastricht or Valkenburg, Opal stated the opinion that he had gone to the Dolomites and was not lost at all. She had lent him enough money for the journey, she declared, and it was known that a young man could live very cheaply among peasants.

‘Maastricht and Valkenburg first, then, as we had planned,’ said Dame Beatrice to Laura on their return journey to London and the tall house in Kensington. ‘You had better get on to the travel agents and arrange for hotel bookings.’

‘For how long?’

‘Three days in Maastricht and a week in Valkenburg should give us ample time to find out that Florian is in neither.’

‘Oh, you think that, do you? Why?’

‘I think Opal knows where he went, and I do *not* think it was to the Dolomites.’

‘Then why on earth can’t she say so, and put an end to the family’s anxiety — not to mention the waste of our time! But what makes you think she knows? — and that it isn’t the Dolomites?’

‘Her demeanour indicates that she knows. While nearly everybody else — to a greater or a lesser degree — is concerned for the young man’s safety, Opal, who, according to her mother, (and this is confirmed by my own observation of

her), is besotted about the young man, remains serenely confident that he is not lost, but is exploring limestone caverns in the Dolomites. If that were so, why was she his only confidante? It seems unlikely, to say the least. Why not have told Binnen and Ruby? There is nothing to be ashamed of in going to the Dolomites.'

It had been agreed that Derde, whether he was in England or Holland, would send Dame Beatrice the news if Florian turned up or his whereabouts became known, so when Laura had arranged for the hotel bookings at Maastricht and Valkenburg, the addresses and dates were transmitted to Leyden Hall and acknowledged by the professor. As soon as this was done, Dame Beatrice and her secretary embarked at Harwich for the Hook of Holland. It would have been much quicker to have flown from London Airport to the Schiphol Airport of Amsterdam, but Laura had a passion for the sea and regarded the eight-hour crossing as pleasure added to the trip.

They spent a night in Scheveningen and on the following day booked in at the hotel in Maastricht and began their enquiries. At Maastricht they were told for the second time the doleful story of the four monks who had become lost among the miles of limestone quarries. Dame Beatrice affected great interest in this gruesome twice-told tale, but was kindly assured by the guide that such a thing could never happen at the present day. He repeated that heads were counted and no one was permitted to lose touch with the party.

Dame Beatrice waited until the pilgrimage was over before she gave the guide a description of Florian and asked whether he had recently visited the labyrinth. As it was late in the season for tourists and the parties had been small, the guide remembered him perfectly.

'In fact,' he said, 'I remember him all the better since it was not his first visit, any more than yours. He had been to the halls and galleries before — twice before, he told me — and had particularly noted the wall-paintings and marvelled at the numbers of the bats — tens of thousands of bats, Madame, as I told you — and he said that he was most interested in all the old workings, particularly in those begun by the Romans. He asked me whether a special expedition could not be arranged to see more of the hundred thousand corridors and the eleven hundred and more cross-roads in the excavations, but I told him I had no authority to let anyone see more than is shown on the conducted tour. He offered me money, but I told him that only a small gratuity was permissible and that no large sum would tempt me to lose my position as guide. Believe me, I kept a very watchful eye on him that he did not take matters into his own hands

and slip away by himself to explore where it is not safe for tourists to go.'

Dame Beatrice said that her young friend was hotheaded and reckless, and that she was relieved to know that he had been kept in order.

'This third visit,' she added, 'would have been only a short time ago, I think.'

'I do not remember which day of the week, but it was fairly recently,' said the guide, 'that he came.'

'Well, we've established one thing, at any rate,' said Laura, when they were clear of the caverns and on their way back to the hotel. 'He certainly came here when he said he would. Grandmother Binnen was right enough there, and the inference is that as he failed to get an extended tour here, he went on to Valkenburg and tried there. And then, of course, he *might* have gone on to the Dolomites, I suppose. Well, there's quite a bit of time to spare if we're going to put in three days at our hotel. What do you propose we should do?'

'I should like to find out where Florian stayed when he was here — or, indeed, if he stayed anywhere at all.'

'A bit of a tall order, isn't it?'

'We can reduce its height, I think. Our plan will be to apply to the Netherlands National Tourist Office in Parkstraat 38, The Hague, and, if they cannot give us direct help, they can tell us the address of our nearest V.V.V. information office. There is certain to be at least one in the province of Limburg.'

'Well, that will certainly use up a day, I should think. Do we hunt in couples, or do you wish us to pursue separate ends?'

'We will go together,' said Dame Beatrice, 'and it will use up two days — one at The Hague and the other at the local information office.'

'And after that?'

'Our movements will depend upon what information we get.'

'Which will probably be damn-all, you know.'

'I realise that, of course, but, to employ your favourite metaphors, we must leave no stone unturned and we ought to explore all avenues.'

'You don't think — talking of exploring avenues — that Florian managed, after all, to elude the guide and went cruising off on his own and got himself lost, do you?'

'I am sure he did not elude that particular guide, child, but, of course, there may be a rota. In fact, I think there would, since the caverns are open for several hours each day. Nevertheless, I shall not trouble to check that point unless we obtain no satisfaction in Valkenburg. I am most anxious not to arouse any

suspicion that our enquiries about Florian are anything but merely cursory. Later on, if Professor Derde agrees, we may have to approach the police for help, but that is a step I wish to avoid as long as possible for the sake of the family.'

'If it's got to come to that, Gavin could do the enquiries through Interpol, couldn't he? Save us a lot of bother.'

'A brilliant thought, my dear Laura, and one which, I confess, would not have come to me so soon, if, indeed, it had come to me at all.'

Laura squinted modestly down her nose and waved a large and shapely hand.

'Oh, I don't know, you know,' she said. 'Still, there it is. After all, Florian is mostly English, so it's our lot's job to find him if he's disappeared abroad. If there's any difficulty, Gavin can always say that he's wanted for embezzlement or something.'

'I imagine that the Netherlands police would be quite willing to try to trace an innocent missing holiday-maker, but our dear Robert will know all about that.'

'I don't think a policeman ought to be called Robert,' said Laura. 'It's tautology. That's one reason why I always call him Gavin. By the way, I don't know whether I'm sickening for something, but I've had another bright thought. Look here, when Florian came over here, he stayed with Binnen and the aunts while Albion finished the two spots of art — the bust and the hand. Right?'

'Undoubtedly, unless Mrs Colwyn-Welch and her daughters are in a conspiracy to deceive us.'

'I can imagine anything of Opal and Ruby, but I can't see Binnen joining in a conspiracy, unless it might be the Resistance during the war.'

'I agree. But, come! Your inspiration.'

'Well, if Florian was staying with them in Amsterdam, wouldn't he have been quite likely to apply to the Amsterdam V.V.V. for information about where to stay in Maastricht and Valkenburg? What's more, I know where the Amsterdam offices are. We passed them more than once. They're in more or less the city centre, Rodkin 5. I got a street-map from there, if you remember, when we were here before.'

Enquiries at the V.V.V. office in Amsterdam, made by Laura, elicited the information that a *mijnheer* answering to Laura's graphic description had indeed called and had asked for advice upon where to stay in Valkenburg. He had been furnished with a list and had marked off three *pensions* — one in Kerkstraat, another in Oud Valkenburgerweg and the third in Dwingelweg.

'All *pensions*?'

‘All *pensions*. The young man explained that he was a student and could not afford to stay in hotels.’

‘Did he also ask about Maastricht?’

‘About Maastricht? Valkenburg is more picturesque, to some minds, than Maastricht, but these are matters of personal preference.’

Armed with this limited amount of information, Laura conveyed it to Dame Beatrice.

‘Queer that he didn’t ask about accommodation in Maastricht, don’t you think?’ she enquired.

‘Not necessarily,’ Dame Beatrice replied. ‘The two towns are about seven and a half miles apart. He need only have visited Maastricht for the sake of exploring the grotto for the third time and then gone on to Valkenburg to stay.’

‘That third time seems a bit odd to me. I mean, I can understand doing it twice — I quite enjoyed our own second visit — but a third go at it seems to me excessive. What’s your opinion?’

‘It coincides with yours, child, but, of course, others may think differently and probably do. There is one point which we may bear in mind, however. Florian may have had reason to impress upon somebody’s consciousness that he had been in the neighbourhood at that particular time. This he appears to have done, for the custodian remembered him perfectly well. Moreover, he kept a watchful eye on him.’

‘So we press on to Valkenburg and dig out where he went from there — unless he’s still there, of course.’

‘I am not convinced that he went on to Valkenburg, child, but we shall see — or, rather, *I* shall see. You may amuse yourself as you will. There is no point in both of us making these enquiries.’

‘You mean they’re going to be tedious, don’t you? Well, let me do them while *you* go along and amuse yourself. It’s about time you did.’

‘I disagree. Apart from amusing yourself, you can be very useful, if you will.’

‘Oh?’

‘You can return here to Amsterdam tomorrow and find out more about the barrel-organ which has recorded *The Flowers of the Forest*.’

Laura looked at her suspiciously.

‘Oh, yes?’ she said. Dame Beatrice regarded her with deep solemnity.

‘I mean it seriously,’ she said. ‘Track it down. Obtain speech with its operators. Find out where Binnie first heard the barrel organ playing that

particular tune.'

A room was booked for Laura in the hotel at which they had stayed previously.

'Lucky to get in,' commented Laura. 'I thought the city was always full.'

'Oh, I have had the rooms — both yours and mine — reserved indefinitely since our last visit. I felt certain that we should be coming here again.'

'All that money! All these weeks!' exclaimed the horrified Laura. 'My Scottish blood cries out upon such extravagance!'

However, she remained, as directed, in Amsterdam, spent a restful night, and then set out to track down the barrel-organ — one of a number, she presumed. It might take some time, she thought.

Dame Beatrice, from Maastricht, made contact with Derde van Zestien before she went on to Valkenburg, indicating that Florian should be appealed to by the Netherlands broadcasting system to declare his whereabouts and return to Norfolk, where his great-uncle was ill. Not at all to her surprise, Derde declined to act upon this advice. Nothing would worry and upset his father more, he averred, then to hear a radio appeal to Florian to come forward.

Dame Beatrice asked whether Bernard was likely to listen to the Netherlands radio, and was told that, in any case, he was kept in touch with news by a correspondent in Amsterdam and that there were Dutch newspapers on sale in England. She replied that she had thought it might have been worth trying, and then she moved on to Valkenburg and visited the official tourist office in Stationstraat, near the centre of the town.

There was no information to be obtained there. No young man answering either to the name or the description of Florian had asked for advice and help, certainly not within the past four weeks or so. She went on to the Town Hall in Grotestraat but, in Laura's expression, drew another blank. There remained the caves, with their well-known matters of interest. Here, again, there was no information to be obtained. The custodian asked whether he had not seen her there before 'in company with a young English lady, large and beautiful,' which showed, Dame Beatrice thought, that he would probably have remembered the much more beautiful youth.

It was clear that the streets in which the *pensions* were situated would have to be compassed about, albeit with only one witness and not with the clouds of these required by Holy Writ. Dame Beatrice was almost certain that hers would be a waste of effort, and, in any case, a task far more suited to the police than to herself. Nevertheless, she had promised to attempt to trace Florian and she was

determined to do her best.

She began her researches in Kerkstraat. To her astonishment, the very first house at which she called had news of Florian. A young Englishman of hyacinth eyes and hair like gold? Certainly he had called, and he had slept, and had promised to return. What was more, he had left his luggage. Not a great deal of luggage, it was true. A little bag to contain nightwear and for shaving. ‘*Mevrouw* is his grandmother? And where staying? At the Hotel Prinses Juliana? *Is een goed hotel. Alleen voor een nacht?*’

Dame Beatrice, with a horrid leer which did not cause the keeper of the *pension* the slightest disquiet, insisted upon discharging Florian’s one-night debt and then said that she was staying not for one night, but for the rest of the week. She begged that, if her grandson turned up during that time, she might be informed immediately so that he might show her the sights of the town. She was speeded on her way back to the Hotel Prinses Juliana with a cordial, ‘*Tot ziens!*’ They exchanged smiles and compliments.

She would have liked to ask to see the ‘little bag’ which Florian had left at the *pension*, but she thought that such a request might have had a deleterious effect upon the good relations existing, so far, between her and *mevrouw* of the *pension*. Besides, she had a feeling that Florian had left the ‘not great deal of luggage’ in lieu of rent for the room. She had a strong suspicion that the canny Dutch landlady had come to the same conclusion. It was clear that she had investigated the contents of the bag and was satisfied with the bargain. Sheer silk pyjamas and an electric razor, Dame Beatrice supposed.

There seemed little more to be learned in Valkenburg. There remained the possibility of an excursion to the limestone caves of the Dolomites, but Dame Beatrice dismissed the idea. For such a journey surely he would have needed the suitcase he had left in Binnen’s apartment in Amsterdam.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Laura the Sleuth

‘Sweet rois of vertew and of gentilness,
Delytsum lily of everie lustyness,
Richest in bontie and in bewtie clear,
And everie vertew that is wenit dear,
Except onlie that ye are mercyleless.’

William Dunbar



Laura's quota of intelligence, which was considerable, was based upon simple theories. She argued that, since the barrel-organ which had played *The Flowers of the Forest* had been stationed near the Wester Kerk, it was reasonable to suppose that this was one of its regular haunts. She repaired to the point of vantage, therefore, at the same time as before, and loitered for half an hour on a bridge over the Herengracht Canal, but there was no sign of the barrel-organ.

Her next idea — and one which proved fruitful — was to walk to the Stationsplein and take the steamer-trip along the canals. It was on the bridge which carried Leidse Straat across a canal that she spotted the first barrel-organ, but it was not the one she sought. However, thought Laura, always optimistic, at least barrel-organs were still in season and, presumably, had not gone on strike. Another commanded the left bank at the Fodor Museum, but it was not until she disembarked at the end of the round trip that she found the particular *draaiorgel* she sought. There it was, with a group round it, playing, of all things, the English tune of a demoded popular song, *Amsterdam, Amsterdam*. Laura was not unmusical and, besides, she had a tenacious memory. She could not recall that this particular tune had figured in the organ's *repertoire*. What was more, when it ended it was followed by the tune which, as she very clearly remembered, had succeeded *The Flowers of the Forest*. The flowers of the forest, it was evident, certainly had 'a' wede away.'

Laura knew nothing of the internal workings of barrel-organs, but she felt

that here was something of interest. She waited until the barrel-organ moved on, and then she followed it. She had made a modest contribution and the men in charge appeared gratified by her continued interest. They covered a fairly long street, for the sounds travelled far and they were anxious to attract a fresh audience. Before they could set their instrument in motion, Laura seized her chance and addressed the older of the two operators.

‘I heard you some weeks ago,’ she said. ‘You played a tune I love very much. Have you still such a tune?’

‘And the name of the tune, please?’

‘It’s a Scottish air called *The Flowers of the Forest*. I so much enjoyed hearing it last time, but I noticed that this time you left it out.’

‘I know not the tune by name, *mevrouw*. I am sorry.’

‘I’ll hum it for you,’ said Laura, and she proceeded to do so. The men exchanged glances. Then the one who had spoken shook his head.

‘*Mevrouw* is mistaken. We never had such a tune. I regret. And now, pardon, we have our living to earn.’

‘Oh, ho!’ thought Laura. ‘Mrs Croc. was right, as usual. There *has* been dirty work at the crossroads and that barrel-organ is all mixed up in it somehow. I suppose it’s no good tagging on and trying to ferret something more out of those men?’

With Laura, to think of a thing was tantamount to carrying it out. She looked thoughtfully after the organ-grinders and then set out to follow them. They went some distance, but halted at the end of a bridge which carried crowds of cyclists and pedestrians. Here one man began to turn the large wheel which rotated the cylinder, while the other picked up the collecting box. Laura walked on to the bridge and leaned on the parapet, gazing down at the waters of the canal as she listened to the music.

The tunes followed one another, but there was no suggestion of *The Flowers of the Forest*. A small crowd soon gathered, and the collecting box made its rounds. Laura took out a florin and waved it. The man with the box came up to her. She said, before she put in the coin:

‘What happened to my favourite tune, then?’

The man looked at her impassively.

‘*Mevrouw* is mistaken. We never had that tune — or else *mevrouw* did not sing it correctly.’ He said it politely, not insolently.

‘You *did* have it, you know,’ said Laura, staring into his china-blue eyes. ‘Didn’t you? Why are you unwilling to agree about it?’

The man shrugged his heavy shoulders.

‘You are mistaken,’ he repeated. ‘I know nothing of such a tune.’

‘No?’ Inspiration came to her. ‘When did you last play outside a block of apartments near the Raadhuis?’

She knew that she had scored, for the man dropped his eyes.

‘Many times,’ he answered sullenly, and turned away before she could put her money into the box. She watched him walk back and saw him speak to his companion, who stopped playing in order to listen. Then he changed places with him. The older man came over to Laura and rattled the collecting box. Laura put in her florin with a smile, but there was nothing smiling about the Netherlander. He said:

‘Thank you, *mevrouw*. And now please stop pestering us. If we have not the tune you wish, we have it not. If you do not believe me, you must listen until we have completed the tunes which we have, then you will be convinced that we speak the truth.’

‘Look,’ said Laura, ‘you can surely admit that you *did* have the tune I hummed to you. It isn’t a crime to change the cylinder. But if you persist in denying that you once had a different cylinder, one which had this tune, it will make me think that there is something fishy going on.’

‘Fishy?’

‘Wrong. Bad. Criminal.’

The man gave her a hard look.

‘You are molesting us,’ he said; and, to Laura’s astonishment and dismay, he left her abruptly and went over to a policeman. In a few moments the policeman was beside her, with the organ-grinder in tow.

‘This man,’ he said, in careful English, ‘complaint is making.’

‘Why?’ asked Laura.

‘He says you are giving offence.’

‘But I’m doing nothing of the kind. I merely asked him to play a favourite tune for me.’

‘He says you follow him and offend him.’

‘I had no intention of offending him.’

‘So — no more. In Amsterdam is an honourable work, the street organ. No?’

‘Yes, of course, if you say so.’

‘So! No more to follow, no more to speak. No more to annoy. Yes?’

‘All right.’

The policeman nodded and took himself off. The older man returned to his

companion. Laura stood her ground, in spite of the wide-eyed stares of three children who had dismounted from their bicycles to hear what the policeman had to say. The organ bawled on. Laura recognised the tune. The cylinder had come full cycle. She was glad of this extra confirmation that *The Flowers of the Forest* no longer formed part of its repertoire. She waited until the organ moved off and then, very thoughtfully indeed, she walked all the way back to her hotel.

‘Something nasty in the woodshed all right,’ thought Laura, ‘and the Colwyn-Welch family is indicated. Now, do I contact Mrs Croc. or do I carry on by myself?’

The fact that she had a doubt made her come to an abrupt decision. Her meal over, she had the porter call a taxi and went to the apartment of Binnen and her daughters. She had primed herself with all sorts of reasons for originating the visit, but none of them proved to be necessary. She was shown in at once, and, to her considerable astonishment, there was Sweyn van Zestien. This explained why the apartment was not locked up.

‘Welcome, Mrs Gavin,’ he said, making her a little bow before giving her his hand. ‘I think we have come here on the same errand.’

‘To tell the truth, I don’t quite know *why* I’ve come,’ said Laura. ‘I suppose I was going to look for something, but, if it was here, you’re certain to have found it by now.’

‘Found it? But — found what?’

‘The cylinder from the barrel-organ.’

Sweyn looked puzzled, as well he might.

‘I’m afraid I do not understand,’ he said.

‘Oh, no, of course not, and I don’t suppose there’s anything in it at all. It’s just that it’s one of those things,’ said Laura, waving her hand. ‘You see, I wouldn’t think anything of it if they hadn’t been so crazy.’

‘They?’

‘The men with the barrel-organ. It used to play *The Flowers of the Forest*, but it doesn’t any more, and, when I asked why, they told the police about me. Not very subtle, what?’

Sweyn said:

‘What do you think of the bust?’

Laura had not noticed it. It was on a high shelf and did not show to advantage, so she stretched up on her toes to obtain a better view. Sweyn, who was even taller than she was, lifted it down and placed it on top of a bookcase. Laura studied it critically.

‘So it’s not in bronze. They’ve painted it gold,’ she said. ‘Yes, it’s good, but does he often have quite such a petulant look?’

‘Oh, I think so,’ Sweyn replied. ‘He has been spoilt by my father. And now, this about the police and the barrel-organ. Are you to be arrested?’

Laura answered his jesting smile with a straight stare and replied:

‘Hardly. You know, this is difficult. You see, I’ve got a feeling that the cylinder is in this house, but, even if it is, I don’t see how I can prove anything from it, and, after all, the Colwyn-Welch family are your relatives, aren’t they?’

‘From which I am to infer...?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Laura. ‘I suppose there’s no news of Florian?’

‘Well, yes, there is, in a way,’ answered Sweyn. ‘I came over because Derde thought there might be a clue here and he asked my aunt Binnen for the keys to the apartment.’

‘Was she willing to give them up?’ asked Laura sharply. Sweyn looked surprised.

‘Why not?’ he asked in his gentle voice. ‘She is greatly worried about the disappearance of Florian. She blames herself. Except to say that he was going to Hoorn, he left no word at all, and she feels she should have discovered his plans.’

‘Hoorn? That’s not far from here, is it?’

‘Not far. He told her that he was going fishing.’

‘She didn’t mention any of this to Dame Beatrice.’

‘She is becoming old. Things do not register themselves in her mind, perhaps, as they used to do.’

‘*Perhaps* that’s the explanation, but I do think she might have mentioned Hoorn. Have you told Dame Beatrice?’

‘Yes, she will know by now. What about this cylinder from the barrel-organ. You think it is important?’

‘Well, as I indicated, if it isn’t important why should those two men stall about it and report me to the police and all that? It *must* be important.’

‘Only in the eyes of some ladies, perhaps. Some ladies are not in proportion.’

‘Thirty-six twenty-four ninety-two?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Sorry! I think you meant that some women lack a *sense* of proportion.’

‘I am sure that is what I meant. Thank you. I refer, of course, to my cousins Opal and Ruby. Now, this cylinder. You will help me search?’

‘When I came here,’ said Laura, with her usual candour, ‘I was prepared (if

able to obtain permission) to turn the joint upside down to look for it. But, honestly, I don't see how the cylinder could prove what I want to prove, so I don't think I'll bother. Thank you for your help. So long!'

'No,' said Sweyn, 'do not go like that. Tell me your suspicions. I do not like my cousins. You will not offend me, whatever you may say.'

'So all the cats jump the same way, do they? That's worth knowing, I suppose.'

'I am not anxious for cats.'

'Nor me, neither. Give me a good stupid horse that will eat his oats.'

Sweyn looked perplexed.

'The English are so fond of animals,' he said doubtfully.

'Fonder than they are of human beings, I think you mean, but I'm *not* English,' said Laura. 'Are you going to Hoorn to pick up the trail?'

'Oh, yes. I cannot think why my aunt did not mention Hoorn sooner.'

'So all that stuff about the Dolomites was so much mashed potato!'

'The Dolomites? Oh, we never thought that Florian would go to the Dolomites.'

'Your cousin Opal seemed to think he would.'

'Opal? She has strange ideas, like other lonely people. One takes very little notice. Tell me, Mrs Gavin, have you seen the Saxon cross at the church of Hope in Derbyshire, England?'

'No, I haven't. Why?'

'You should go there. It would interest you. Not all of the cross remains, but there is enough to show Danish influence in the knot-work panels. I am sure you will perceive an affinity between it and the rune-stones. The Saxon cross in the churchyard at Eyam, in the same county, is quite a perfect example, but bears little relationship to the rune-stones. It is carved in spiral markings similar to those on the wall of the queen's *megaron* in the palace at Knossos in Crete — the maze of the Minotaur, you know. There is a more unusual Saxon cross in the churchyard at Leek.'

'Look here, Professor,' said Laura, 'you're trying to tell me something. Can't you come right out with it?'

Sweyn smiled and shrugged.

'There are limestone caves in Derbyshire,' he said. 'I think Florian may have gone to England from Hoorn.'

'More likely than that he's in the Dolomites, I should think. But, if he's in England, why hasn't he gone back to his granduncle?'

‘I do not know, and there is no point in trying to guess. Are you fond of diamonds?’

‘Not particularly.’

‘Yet you have a very fine diamond in your ring.’

‘Yes, I had to be bribed into becoming engaged to be married. You understand diamonds, then?’

‘Oh, yes, my father has always been interested in diamonds, so, of course, I know a little about them. So we look, or we do not look, for this cylinder?’

‘If what I suspect is true, it won’t still be here, and, anyway, it’s lousy of me to snoop about in your aunt’s place.’

‘What could the cylinder tell us if we could find it?’

‘Well, that’s just the point. It couldn’t tell us anything unless we could try it out on a barrel-organ, and we’re hardly likely to be able to do that.’

‘But, if we could...?’

‘Well, at some point or other, it would play a tune called *The Flowers of the Forest*. This is it.’ She began to hum. Sweyn shook his head.

‘I am sorry. I do not know it,’ he said. ‘What is the connection between this tune and the disappearance of Florian?’

‘Your brother believes that Florian’s dead.’

‘I know. I do not agree with him. But the tune?’

‘It’s the words, actually.’ She sang them. ‘It’s a lament for the young men who fell at the battle of Flodden.’

‘I see... yes. A lament for young men. And you think that the young Florian — yes, I see. And you think Aunt Binnen knew these words and knows — or suspects — that Florian is dead and so she finds the tune unacceptable and has purchased the cylinder from the barrel-organ people. It is a theory, that. Lost in a cave — hungry, perhaps hurt. Dead — I think not.’

‘What made you think of Derbyshire, though?’ asked Laura.

‘During the Occupation many of our people lived in caves. Then, when the war was over, I went to England many times. I was interested in caves. I think I have visited all the English caves.’

‘Did you do any pot-holing?’

‘Oh, yes, I did pot-holing. Well, I shall be on my way. May I escort you to any place?’

‘No, thanks. I’d better go back to my hotel. By the way, when we met just now you said you thought we’d come here on the same errand. You don’t still think so, I take it?’

‘No, I was too hasty in speaking. I meant that in this apartment I hoped to find some clue to the disappearance of Florian, but there is nothing. Shall we go to Hoorn this afternoon? I had intended to go and should be glad of your company. Is Dame Beatrice with you in Amsterdam?’

‘No, she’s still looking for news of Florian in Maastricht and Valkenburg. I’m here on my own for a day or two. Right. Let’s do Hoorn together. Have you had lunch?’

Hoorn, forty kilometres from Amsterdam, proved to be a charming small town with a couple of hotels and some picturesque brick-fronted houses, fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth-century churches, the great dike of the IJsselmeer, a Stadhuis built in 1613 and a finely-fronted museum with wrought-iron gates, a good collection of pictures and some fourteenth-century cellars.

Sweyn and Laura visited this museum and described Florian to the attendant but there was no news of him.

‘I don’t quite know why he decided to come here,’ said Laura, when they were in the street.

‘Oh, didn’t I tell you? It is merely that Albion, the sculptor, has a studio here. I think we ought to visit him and find out what he knows.’

‘I thought Albion lived in Amsterdam.’

‘Yes, a great deal of his time. Mostly, I think, in winter and early spring. There is more work for him in Amsterdam, of course, but he lives out here when he can. He finds it pleasant.’

‘Do you know where he lives?’

‘No. We will go to the harbour and ask the fishermen. He has painted some of them and their boats. They are certain to know where he lives.’

‘Not necessarily, I should have thought. The person who would be bound to know is an art-dealer. There would be such a man in a place like this, I suppose?’

‘We will try the market square.’

A double-fronted shop in the Rode Steen, once a place of public execution, displayed good reproductions of pictures by Rembrandt van Rijn, Franz Hals, Thomas de Keyser, Bartholomeus van der Helst, Pieter de Hooch and Jan Vermeer.

‘This is it,’ said Laura. ‘Will you do the asking or shall I?’

‘I will ask in Dutch,’ said Sweyn. He did this and apparently received a satisfactory reply, for he smiled, bowed his thanks and escorted Laura from the shop.

‘Can you walk a little?’ he asked. ‘He lives on a farm not far from here.’

‘I’d love to walk,’ said Laura, with enthusiasm. ‘Lives on a farm? That’s enterprising of him.’

‘I do not suppose the farm belongs to him. He lodges there, I think.’

Milking a Frisian cow was a fresh-faced girl in a checked apron and the small lace cap of the neighbourhood. She directed them to the farmhouse and an older woman wearing glasses invited them in and said that *Mijnheer* Albion was resting, but that she was certain he would be pleased to have visitors. She seated them in a room containing Delft china, a silver soup-tureen, a table like a polished mirror and a dozen or so family portraits, one of which was in oils and depicted the woman who had answered the door.

‘An original Albion, no doubt,’ said Laura, getting up to obtain a closer look at it. ‘I don’t know a great deal about painting, but to my untutored eye it seems a pretty fair bit of brushwork. Do sculptors usually paint as well?’

She resumed her seat just before the woman returned with the artist. He was a tall, sturdy man of early middle age with the long mouth of a lawyer and the far-seeing eyes of a sailor. His hands were grimy, with broad, stumpy fingers, and he wore thick brown trousers and had on a pyjama jacket under a dirty grey sweater. His expression was good-tempered and cheerful.

‘Well, well!’ he said. ‘And what can I do for you? I’m full up with commissions for the next six months, but after that I might fit you in.’ He reduced his eyes to slits and summed up Laura. ‘Magnificent,’ he remarked. ‘You would make a splendid nude. Are you a virgin?’

‘Good heavens, no!’ exclaimed Laura, laughing at the naïve question. ‘I’ve been married for years and I’ve got a son at prep. school. Anyway, I’m afraid we haven’t come to put another commission in your way. We wondered whether you could help us.’

‘Not with money. My charity begins at home and stays there. You may believe you’re collecting for a good cause, but begging is begging, whether it’s for yourself or a cat’s home.’

‘We are not collecting anything but a small item of information,’ said Sweyn. ‘I believe you have recently completed a portrait bust of a young relative of mine, Florian Colwyn-Welch.’

‘Oh, yes. A fellow too handsome to be interesting. I put the price up a bit when I saw him. It does my work no good to portray those sort of beautiful, mindless people.’

The trouble is that he’s disappeared. We thought it just possible that you might know where he is.’

‘Why should I?’

‘We thought it was worth trying,’ said Laura. ‘His grand-uncle has been ill and wants to see him, but he’s vanished, and we knew he came here to sit to you.’

‘I’ll show you the painting I’ve done of his hand holding a flower. It’s rather nice. I refer, of course to my painting, not to the hand, which is that of one type of killer.’

He left them and returned shortly with a framed canvas. It depicted a beautiful, rather girlish hand holding a hyacinth between thumb and first finger. The other fingers were extravagantly cocked. Laura and Sweyn admired the painting and the artist removed it. When he came back, Laura said:

‘If it’s finished, why hasn’t the family got it?’

‘I’m waiting to hear from them. The bust I did in my studio in Amsterdam, and they have it in their apartment. The original order was for a bronze, but I think the price was prohibitive. Bronzes do come expensive, of course. The hand-and-flower picture was done here — the hand from nature, the hyacinth from memory, for the flowering season is over. I did a good many flower-studies at one time, so I know this is good. The hand itself looks rather silly. I gave him a pencil to hold and that’s how he held it.’

‘And you can’t give us any idea of where to look for Florian?’ asked Laura.

‘He said he wanted to get back to England. That is as much as I know. I asked him to pay me for the picture I showed you just now, but he said he had not commissioned it. That was true enough, so I shall dun his grandmother for the money and if she won’t cough up I shall sell it for what it will fetch.’

‘I’m sure she’ll cough up,’ said Laura.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Towards Kinderscout

‘Delay is kind,
And we too soon shall find
That which we seek, yet fear to know.’

Thomas Stanley



Laura made haste to contact Dame Beatrice, who told her to stay in Amsterdam where she would join her on the following day.

‘I think Sweyn knows something,’ said Laura, when they met. ‘All that guff about Saxon crosses in Derbyshire is so much mashed potato, you know.’

‘You surmise that these Saxon crosses do not exist?’

‘Oh, I’m quite sure they do, but why should he be so anxious to refer to them and to advise me so strongly to go and see them?’

‘You have led him to believe that you are interested in rune-stones.’

‘Yes, but Saxon crosses don’t bear much resemblance to rune-stones, except that lots of rune-stones have a religious bias, and can be found in churchyards. No, he was giving me a broad hint. I want to know why.’

‘We could go to Derbyshire and find out, child.’

‘I hoped you’d say that. Of course, my hunch may be quite wrong. I may be taking you on a wild-goose chase.’

‘I have great faith in your hunches. Purchase steamer tickets. By tomorrow night, at the latest, we can be back in London. There you shall hie you to a public library and read all about Derbyshire, a county of great charm and with some delightful natural scenery, and one with which I have only the most superficial acquaintance. Indeed, except for a tea once in Glossop and a lunch, on another occasion, in Matlock Bath, I know nothing about it at all.’

‘Read up all I can find about Derbyshire? A job after my own heart,’ said Laura. ‘You shall know the county from A to Z by the time I’ve finished.’

What she came up with at the end of her researches was of significant interest. Dame Beatrice listened as, after dinner, Laura read her notes aloud.

‘Most interesting stuff,’ she said, before she began her recital, ‘and, if Florian was really keen on caves and holes and things, definitely germane to the issue.’

She proceeded to describe deep fissures, eerie caverns, abandoned lead mines, underground lakes, stalactites and mysterious streams.

‘You will enjoy yourself,’ said Dame Beatrice, at the end of the recital.

‘You’re not thinking of coming with me, then?’

‘No, I have decided that my work lies in North Norfolk, and that, in any case, you will be happier without me. I should be very much obliged, though, if you would take a companion. Can you think of anyone who might like to go?’

‘Most people, I suppose, are otherwise engaged at this time of year. Old Kitty wouldn’t be any good at pot-holing, and it’s the wrong time of year for Alice — bang between her summer holiday and the break at half-term.’

‘Suppose I could arrange for our dear Robert to accompany you, would you like that?’

‘Gavin?’ said Laura, referring to her husband, as usual, by his surname. ‘Could you really wangle it?’

‘I could try.’

As Dame Beatrice’s infrequent but powerful representations to the Home Office or to New Scotland Yard invariably received respectful attention, Laura had little doubt of the result of this one. Her confidence in her employer was justified. Detective Chief-Inspector Robert Gavin presented himself at Dame Beatrice’s Kensington house and reported for special duty.

‘And what’s it in aid of, Dame B.?’ he enquired, after giving her an affectionate kiss. ‘They didn’t seem too sure what you wanted me for, when they told me you’d asked for me. Something to do with those Dutch people you and Laura have been seeing so much of lately?’

‘Possibly. I want you and Laura to go to Derbyshire.’

‘That sounds within our scope. What do we do when we get there?’

‘Laura will brief you. I don’t know how long you will need to stay, but, at any rate, you have been lent to me for at least a week, so Laura will arrange hotel accommodation for a week and then you can see how you get on. I want to write up some case notes, so I’ll leave you together to make your plans.’

‘Where shall I try to book us in?’ asked Laura, when Dame Beatrice had gone.

‘Don’t know. What have you found out so far? *Is* it a murder hunt? Dame B. seems to have hinted as much to the Assistant Commissioner.’

‘Well, it’s a common or garden disappearance, on the face of it, but some of

the relatives don't seem too happy about it, and Mrs Croc. has been asked to trace the missing youth. We went over to Holland, as that's where he was last heard of, but there I was given what I regarded as a tip-off that he might be in Derbyshire.'

'Who tipped you off?'

'The younger uncle, Professor Sweyn van Zestien.'

'Oh, the chap who collects rune-stones. You mentioned him and his brother in your letters. What's he like?'

'If you mean to ask whether he's engaged in any funny business, I can only say that, in my opinion, nothing is less likely. He's got his suspicions, though, and so has Professor Derde van Zestien, his elder brother. I'm bound to admit that it's all rather odd and, to my mind, very hole and corner. This missing boy's grandmother and his two maiden aunts had set their hearts on having a bronze bust of him and a painting of his lilywhite paw clutching a blue hyacinth, the hyacinth (according to them) being the same colour as his eyes.'

'Good Lord! Spare us from our female relatives! What revolting ideas women have! Colour of his eyes, indeed!'

'Less of that! What about men getting a kick out of strip-tease?'

'That's understandable and natural. Male mauleys gripping blue hyacinths are not!'

'Very well, if you say so. Anyway, the sittings for the bust were given in Amsterdam and the hand and flower (sounds like a pub) was painted in the artist's other studio at a farm near Hoorn. The farm has Frisian cattle and milkmaids and he likes it there much better than his place in Amsterdam, but, of course, it's in Amsterdam that he gets his commissions, I'm told. I went to Hoorn to see him, and he seemed pretty certain that Florian...'

'*Who?*'

'Florian.'

'Good God!'

'Well, his mother's name's Flora, so I expect that explains it.'

'It explains the pansy-like fistful of bluebells, too! Well, well! Go on.'

'He thought Florian had gone back to England.'

'Gone *back* to England?'

'Yes. He lives in Norfolk with his sister and his grand-uncle. The granduncle is head of the family of van Zestien and apparently stinkingly wealthy. He's a diamond merchant.'

'Is he, by Jove!'

‘There couldn’t be any connection between that and Florian’s disappearance.’

‘Why not?’

‘When Florian walked out on him and went to the grandmother and the aunts in Amsterdam, old Bernard disinherited him, so it couldn’t be to anybody’s advantage to do Florian in, if that’s what you’re thinking.’

‘Who’s the present heir?’

‘A rather decent Jew-boy named Bernardo Rose. The Rose family are also in diamonds. I don’t think he’ll get the lot, of course, but even half would be a pretty hefty chunk of dough.’

‘Does this young fellow Rose know he’s going to inherit that much of the kitty?’

‘Oh, yes, of course he does. Actually, I believe it’s merely a restitution of original rights. I think the old man cut Bernardo out and substituted Florian when there was a row and the engagement between Bernardo and Florian’s sister Binnie sprang a leak. Bernardo, you see, handed Florian a punch in the ribs and Binnie took a dim view and slung back the ring. But it’s all right now. Mrs Croc. worked it so that they kissed and made friends.’

‘Who? Bernardo and Florian?’

‘No, Bernardo and Binnie, chump!’

‘Well, if nobody had a reason for sending Florian to heaven, why does anybody think he’s been murdered?’

‘Well, they probably only think he’s ordinarily dead, and I suppose it’s conceivable also that he’s lost his memory and wandered off, but he hadn’t lost it when he went over to Amsterdam this last time. He sat for the sculpture — it’s in plaster painted over in gold, incidentally. It was supposed to be done in bronze, but the price was too high. Well, he told his grandmother and his aunts that he was going to explore caves, grottoes and abandoned mines in Maastricht and Valkenburg. The older aunt, however, said he had also told *her* that he would be going on to explore similar spots in the Dolomites. She claims she lent or gave him the money to go, but her mother avers that she did not have any money, and, having met old Binden, I bet she’s right. Her daughters are entirely dependent on her and, from my observation of her, I should hardly class her as a willing spender. I suppose she’s afraid they’d leave home if she allowed them enough money to live on.’

‘I see. Did this — er — Florian realise that he would be offending his granduncle by prancing over to Amsterdam like that?’

‘I shouldn’t think he *could* have done, but he’s very cocky, and cocky people are apt to be obtuse where other people’s feelings are concerned.’

‘Very true. One other thing strikes me. These two professors — didn’t I get the impression from one of your letters that they are the old man’s sons?’

‘That’s right. But there’s a daughter named Maarte, who married Bernardo’s papa and so kept diamonds in the family, whereas the two sons had no such idea, but, instead, went into the lecture-room-and-church-mouse business, to the ire and irritation, doubtless, of their sire. They’re fond of him, but at one time I believe he cut them off with a solitary Dutch guilder and, from what I gather of their characters, nobody cared less than they did. They’re quite unworldly and live only for their work.’

‘Research can be expensive. Didn’t you tell me one of them goes to Mexico for his?’

‘I don’t suppose he spends much, except for his fare, and I dare say he goes with a party and they charter a plane. Anyhow, if you’re thinking of them as possible criminals, well, they just aren’t, and that’s all there is to it.’

‘You’re not often wrong about people, so I accept that as a working hypothesis. What about the rest of the family?’

‘I wouldn’t put anything past Auntie Opal. I’m sure she’s nasty, but I can’t see what she could gain by putting Florian out of the way. The old man would never leave *her* his money. I’m pretty certain of that!’

‘But what about her mother? The old boy’s sister, isn’t she? Could *she* have expectations?’

‘I should hardly think so, but, of course, I don’t know. Anyway, she dotes on Florian, so does Opal. I don’t know about Ruby, the other aunt, but she’s such a rabbit that she wouldn’t put *anybody* out of the way, no matter what she might hope to gain by it.’

‘Crippen was a rabbit, remember — or so it was thought. Ever been bitten by a rabbit?’

‘Not so far as my memory serves me, but I take your point. *My* point is that Ruby wouldn’t stand to gain anything by Florian’s death, any more than Opal would.’

‘I suppose Florian’s dad is named Sapphire!’

‘He answers to the perfectly ordinary name of Frank. He and his wife live in Scotland and own some hotels there.’

‘Well, parents don’t often sacrifice their offspring, except for ritual purposes, so I think we can rule them out. Who else is there?’

‘Simply nobody who could gain anything from Florian’s death, so far as I can see.’

‘Revenge?’

‘On Florian? He’s cocky, as I said, and a bit of a poop, I admit, but I can’t see why anybody would want to be revenged on him.’

‘Could the Jewish element be involved in any way? Anti-Semitism on his part?’

‘Good gracious, no! Bernardo socked him once, as I told you, but that was simply man-to-man. The only people left — and neither of them fits the picture of a murderer — are the rather terrible grandmother Rebekah Rose and her incredibly quiet and beautifully dressed daughter Petra. You’d adore old Rebekah. She offered to buy Mrs Croc.’s emerald ring at a tenth of its value. Haggling over money is her only interest. She’s utterly outrageous and the most gorgeous fun, but, apart from doing it down over a monetary transaction, she wouldn’t hurt a fly.’

‘Oh, well, I’ll take your word for it. How does she get on with her grandson?’

‘Bernardo? They fight with one another all the time, but Mrs Croc. is certain that really they love each other dearly.’

‘You can’t imagine old Rebekah trying to clear the way for Bernardo by removing Florian? I mean, if money *is* her god...’

‘No, I *can’t* imagine it, but that doesn’t make it out of the question, I suppose. Anyway, Bernardo is definitely in the will.’

‘One other point occurs to me. When was the broken engagement mended and Bernardo reinstated as part heir presumptive — before or after there was this hue and cry after Florian?’

‘Oh, Lord!’ said Laura, dismayed. ‘Yes, there *is* that, isn’t there?’ Then she brightened up again. ‘Oh, it doesn’t make any difference, though,’ she added. ‘It was Florian’s walking out on his granduncle, and not the mended engagement, that got him disinherited.’

‘It doesn’t seem a *strong* enough reason for disinheriting him,’ said Gavin, frowning. ‘What’s old van Zestien like? — crusty, irascible, autocratic?’

‘Well, he takes his position as head of the family quite seriously, of course, but, actually, although on the non-talkative side, he’s an old pet.’

‘Did he know where Florian was going when he left his house?’

‘Oh, I think so. There wasn’t any secret about it, so far as I gathered.’

‘Then I think the old gentleman had some other reason for cutting him out of

his testamentary depositions.'

'There was no other reason given, and nothing more sinister suggested or even hinted at.'

'Families don't like washing their dirty linen in public, Laura. Anyway, I may be wrong. Where do you suggest we stay in Derbyshire?'

'I bought an Ordnance map to check with my notes. I'll get it.'

It proved to be the one-inch Tourist Map of the Peak District, showing the boundary of the National Park. It was a magnificent sheet, mounted on cloth and measuring roughly forty-two by thirty-two inches over all. It included bits of Oldham, Manchester, Stockport, Macclesfield and Stoke-on-Trent to the west, and a sizeable chunk of Sheffield to the east.

'Excellent value for nine bob,' said Gavin. 'I do appreciate the thought that we might like to go to Oldham! Well, now, where do we start?'

Laura's itinerary, compiled from her notes, included Buxton, Castleton and (since she supposed she had better tell Sweyn that she had seen his Saxon cross with the knot-work panels) the village of Hope. The other village she intended to visit was Peak Forest, a mile from whose boundaries lay the Eldon Hole. She had decided to leave it to the last because at Poole's Cavern on the slope of Grin Low, and at Castleton, there were guides to be interrogated. Eldon Hole, however, was fenced in and no guide was available to help in the exploration of its awesome depths.

She and Gavin made their headquarters in Buxton and 'did' Poole's Cavern on the first morning of their stay. It was one of a series of natural limestone caves in which the dripping water had formed stalactites and had worn the rocks into various incredible and fantastic shapes. It was bitterly cold in the cave, a fact which Gavin, always prearmed, had established in conversation with the hotel porter. He had compelled the reluctant Laura, therefore, to wrap up warmly and had added a second pullover to his own outfit.

In the cave, a ruminating stream dolefully chanted its thoughts. The guide went ahead to light the way. So late in the season there were not many tourists. There was plenty of chance to detain him in conversation at the end of the trip. He did not remember having seen Florian.

'Well, that's one knocked off the record, anyway,' said

Gavin cheerfully at lunch. 'What's the programme for this afternoon? Do you desire to take the waters?'

'I don't want any more caves, anyway.'

'Then what about your Saxon cross or crosses? We could use the car to visit

those.'

The first church was beside the River Noe. They went to it by way of the Glossop road, turned off at Chapel-en-le-Frith and went on, amid hilly scenery and some extraordinary bends in the road, to Castleton and Hope.

'Well, at least we know how to get to Castleton now,' said Laura. 'You know, if we have time, we ought to do some walking while we're in these parts.'

The church itself held little that was of interest, but the Saxon cross was indisputable. They gave it solemn attention and then Gavin said:

'You know, it hasn't taken us all that time to come here. Why not do Castleton while we're more or less on the spot? Then we could do some other cave tomorrow.'

'I think there's too much to see. We need a whole day. There are four places and we'd need to see them all. There's the Peak Cavern, the Speedwell Mine, (which involves a boat on an underground lake), the Blue John Mine and the Treak Cliff cavern. It would be silly to do a bit of all that, and still have to come back and do the rest at another time.'

'How right you are. Well, then, let's have a look at the church and that square-faced Norman keep on the top of the hill.'

The keep was Peak Castle, stone-built on the site of an earlier wooden structure, and was a grim little fortress on a hill which overlooked the village it had once both threatened and guarded. The view from the courtyard was extensive and very fine, and Laura became more determined than before to walk such a glorious, hilly countryside. They drove into Glossop for tea and the next morning set out again for Castleton.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Eldon Hole

‘It is a very hazardous place, for is a man or beast too near the Edge of the bank and trip, they fall in without retrieve.’

Celia Fiennes



The excursion on the following day proved interesting, but, from the point of view of Laura’s mission, unfruitful.

‘Trippery, but quite good exercise,’ was her comment as, after a Stygian boat-ride on an underground lake in the Speedwell Mine, she and her husband had climbed more than a hundred steps back to daylight.

‘Rather nice, though, that passage between the rocks, and the Aladdin’s cave place with the candle-light,’ said Gavin.

‘A sort of Dutch effect,’ commented Laura. ‘One of those dimly-lit interiors where so much is suggested and so little revealed. A pretty good waterfall, too, in that enormous cavern where we disembarked. I must say I relish the sound of a roaring cascade.’

The guide had no information to give them about Florian.

‘We get so many,’ he said. ‘I wouldn’t notice anyone in particular unless they misbehaved themselves, or were foreigners, or something of that.’

‘Well, we’ve done the Peak Cavern and the Speedwell Mine,’ said Laura, as she and Gavin, after a restaurant lunch, made for the Blue John mine on the road to Mam Tor, ‘and I don’t suppose this next one will yield anything, either.’ She was right. The Blue John was interesting, beautiful and historically important, but again yielded no information of the kind which they sought.

‘Well, personally, I’ve had enough of climbing steps,’ said Gavin, as they emerged on to the road. ‘Let’s see. We did a hundred and six, at the very least, this morning, and a hundred and seventy-seven this afternoon. I’m gittin’ fair wore out, as the gentleman said. Do we *have* to do this last cave?’

‘Well, it’s modern and electrically lighted and everything made easy, so I

don't suppose it would have interested Florian much, but I'd better leave no stone unturned. It's just along here.'

'Still no luck,' said Gavin, when they had admired the stalactites and stalagmites, the blue fluor spar in the rock formations, the anemolites and the general effect of the modern lighting. 'But you didn't think he would have come here. Remains to do — what and when?'

'The Eldon Hole. Tomorrow afternoon. It's by far the likeliest place for him to have tried, so long as he had a good head for heights and could climb a bit. We'll go there after an early lunch. I'll tell you what else we'll do. We'll take the car as far as Chapel-en-le-Frith and walk the rest. It will be perfectly simple, so long as we take the map with us, and I'd love a hike over those hills.'

From Chapel-en-le-Frith, with its panoramic view from the churchyard, a secondary road, which led them uphill and then dropped to meet the main road to Peak Forest, brought them, on the following day and at the village crossroads, to a narrow way past Dam Hall and Old Dam. Here the map indicated a turn to the left and this took them on to an uphill, northerly bridle-path which soon degenerated into a footpath which led them to the Hole.

This was on the slope of Eldon Hill and proved to be an awe-inspiring place, an immense yawn in the landscape, as though one of the giants of Scandinavian mythology had changed himself by his magic into a hillside, but had been unable to disguise his vast and partly-open mouth.

'Quite something,' said Gavin, gazing over the fence at the apparently bottomless hole. 'And where do we go from here?'

'Down it, of course,' said Laura briskly. 'Why do you suppose I'm wearing slacks?'

'*Down* it? Not on your life, my girl!'

'Don't be silly. It's only two hundred feet deep.'

'And do you happen to notice (a) that it's fenced in, (b) that it has a sheer drop on three sides, (c) that the bushes which cling to it would hardly serve to sustain us if we fell, and (d) that even if we did find Florian's corpse down there, we couldn't get it up by ourselves?'

'The fence is there to be climbed. The fourth side isn't all that difficult. People have been down there before and climbed out quite all right. The bushes are fine. If we find Florian's body, we have only to tell the local gendarmes and leave them to produce block and tackle or whatever it may be,' said Laura firmly. 'Besides, who said anything about "we"? Obviously you must stay up top in case you have to run for assistance. According to the map, there are a number

of farms not so very far away, and these upland farmers are good at giving help. Not to worry — I shan't break my neck. I'm much too fond of it.'

'You are not going to climb down there,' said Gavin. 'It needs at least four people and some rope and so on. I don't intend to be left a widower at my age.'

They eyed one another.

'I'm going to do it,' said Laura. 'It's been done before, and, if others can do it, so can I.'

'What about a compromise, then?'

This reasonable suggestion surprised her by its very reasonableness.

'Such as?' she enquired militantly.

'Well, you've just pointed out that there are a number of farms around. I can't spot any of them from here, but — let's sit down and spread out the map.'

Laura did not attempt to veto this suggestion. She took two plastic squares from the pockets of her anorak, shook them out and spread them on the grass.

'Turf may be a bit damp at this time of year,' she remarked. They seated themselves and spread out the map. 'Here we are,' she said. 'These three farms seem to be well within reach. What about it?'

'Just this. Somebody at one of the farms may have spotted Florian or even may have spoken to him. That's if he *has* been here, of course. I suggest that we go the rounds and make a few enquiries. If it seems likely that he *did* climb down this gosh-awful hole, I don't mind if you go down after him, provided that the farm people or the police or the nearest fire-brigade or someone will come up here to see fair play and haul you out if you find (as I shrewdly suspect) that climbing down, with or without the help of the bushes, is one thing, but climbing up again is quite another. How about it, eh?'

Laura got up, went to the fence and looked over. Gavin knew better than to say any more. Slowly she turned and came back to him.

'Don't you *really* want me to go down?' she asked. Gavin knew that he had won.

'I just think it would be damn silly and do no real good,' he said. 'And, besides, a nice fool *I* should look, going to the fire brigade and saying, "Look here, sorry to trouble you and all that, but my wife's got herself into a hole and I can't get her out."'

Laura laughed.

'All right,' she said. 'It seems a pity, though. I'd been looking forward to it. Still, if it's going to worry you...'

'Into my grave, darling girl.'

They were lucky at the first farm. A young man, answering to Laura's description of Florian, had called there 'a week or two back' to ask for directions. He wanted to see the Eldon Hole and had asked whether it was possible to explore it. Told that it was a very dangerous place and had a bad reputation and that, in any case, nobody should ever attempt to go into it alone, he had remarked that 'we shan't bother, then,' and had expressed thanks. A nice-mannered young chap and did ought to have been a filmstar with them looks.

Gavin exchanged glances with Laura. She nodded. Gavin said to the farmer's wife,

'We thought our friend was alone. Did he — are you sure he said "we"?''

The farmer's wife was perfectly sure.

'Then, did you see the others?'

There had been one other, a girl. In the opinion of the farmer's wife, she ought to have known better than to encourage a young lad to think of climbing down the Eldon Hole. Everybody knew what a dangerous place that could be. Anyway, she had asked the couple whether they would like a cup of tea and they had come into the kitchen and had had one, and a slice of jam-tart, and then the young man had fished out a box of chocolates and had offered it round, but when she had noticed that they were liqueur chocolates, 'and foreign, at that,' the farmer's wife had refused them and they had been put away again.

'Foreign? Any idea which country?' Gavin asked. The farmer's wife could not say with any certainty, but the name reminded her of gin or cherry brandy, she thought, or it might have been that drink with eggs in it. She invited them in for a cup of tea. To Laura's surprise, Gavin accepted with alacrity and gratitude. He was adept at employing delaying tactics when Laura had formulated any plan of which he did not approve. She always was suspicious of his ruses, but, as in the present instance, it was not easy to catch him out.

Over the strong tea and sponge sandwich provided by the farmer's wife, he asked whether she knew where the girl had come from. She was a local girl, and was either from the village of Hayfield or possibly from Glossop itself, the farmer's wife surmised. She had not asked any questions of her guests, but those were the places mentioned.

Gavin passed on — by what conversational alchemy Laura could not decide — to talk about upland farming. Cattle, he supposed, were its mainstay. Yes, they had Frisians. Her husband thought they were the best, but Mr Manns, he thought well of Herefords and was trying a cross with the Highland breed. Of course, there were sheep, too, but no lambing until March, although December

would be better for prices. It was the weather made it March.

Gavin passed on to sheep and then, as the sun began to set, he looked at his watch and decided that it was time to make a move. Even Laura, he thought, would not contemplate a descent of Eldon Hole after dark.

At dinner in the hotel, she said:

‘Taking it by and large, I’m beginning to think you’re right.’

‘As how?’ Gavin cautiously enquired.

‘About there being something more to it than merely the granduncle’s displeasure about Florian’s popping over to Amsterdam to sit for the bust, and all that. And I don’t believe he’s fallen down that Hole. If he was with a girl, surely she’d have raised hell if he’d met with an accident or couldn’t climb up again. Do you think he’s deliberately gone into hiding?’

‘He’s obviously taken himself out of the bosom of the family, if only temporarily.’

‘I’m glad, of course, if it’s proved that he hasn’t been murdered, but it’s a bit of a let-down, isn’t it? Let’s go to Hayfield tomorrow and tear the place apart to find this girl. If we can’t flush her in Hayfield, we’ll try Glossop. I’m not going home without something to report. What say you?’

‘I’m with you all the way,’ said Gavin cordially. Laura scowled at him.

‘Yes, you got your own way about the Eldon Hole, didn’t you?’ she said.

‘No, you very nobly gave it me,’ said Gavin. He refilled her glass. ‘Here’s to another kind love!’

‘Polygamous brute!’ said Laura. They set out, after a late breakfast on the following day, for Hayfield and called in, at Gavin’s suggestion, for a drink at a public house.

‘If the girl does live in Hayfield, the chances are that Florian has entertained her here,’ he said. ‘Let’s occupy stools, put our feet on the brass rail, and obtain speech with the barmaid. I’m glad it’s a barmaid. Barmen, unless they’re the landlord, always seem to have such nasty, suspicious minds, whereas barmaids are little friends of all the world, (so long as you don’t get fresh with them). When I give you the O.K., come out with your classic description of Florian’s loveliness, will you?’

The barmaid recognised the description.

‘Why, he’s been in here several times,’ she said. ‘He works at the garage. Do you know him, then? He speaks very nice and his manners is nice and he’s that handsome you don’t know where to look. Is he a relation of yours?’

‘No, not a relation,’ said Gavin. ‘He’s quarrelled with his family and taken

himself off, and, as my wife here knows him, we've said we'll try to find him. His people are very well off and he really isn't trained to earn his own living, so they're rather worried about him.'

'Oh, he may not be trained, but he knows about cars all right. He'll come to no harm without some woman gets her hooks on him. He looks too good for this world. Just like an angel, he is. What a film star he'd make! It isn't right he should dirty those beautiful hands in a garage.'

Laura thought of the effeminate and beautiful hand she had seen in the picture at Hoorn, and shuddered.

'I don't suppose he'll stay there long,' she said. 'Actually, he's writing a book about caves. We were rather afraid that he might have attempted to climb down Eldon Hole.'

'Ah, that's a dangerous place. Mind you, it *has* been done, but the last lot as tried nearly had a serious accident with their ropes and pulleys and things, so I was told. Ah, it's a nasty place, that is. I wouldn't wonder but what it might be haunted. They say there's a dreadful great cave down there at the bottom. Fair gives me the shivers to think about it, that it do.'

'When he comes here, does he come alone?' Gavin enquired.

Sometimes, and sometimes not. Sometimes he had brought Gertie Summers, but he hadn't treated her. That was to say, she did the first round and he did the second, and never anything but beer, and two half-pints each was all they had.'

There seemed to Laura no point in seeking out Gertie. It was going to prove a very simple matter to find Florian, after all. They obtained directions from the barmaid and set out for the garage.

Florian was servicing a car. Laura recognised the back of his blond head and spoke to him. He turned round, his beauty not in the least marred by a smear of black grease across one temple. Not unnaturally, he was greatly surprised to see Laura.

'Oh, hullo, Mrs Gavin,' he said, with the wolfish smile which distorted and marred his countenance. 'What brings you to these parts?'

'Curiosity, your aunt Opal and your uncle Sweyn,' Laura replied. 'Gavin, this is Mr Florian Colwyn-Welch.'

'Granted your curiosity, what has my aunt to do with it?' asked Florian, acknowledging the introduction with a mere nod of the head.

'She told us you had gone to the Dolomites,' replied Laura.

'So I would have done if I could have afforded it. I couldn't, although I tried to touch her for a loan, so here I am. I didn't let her know, of course. I don't want

her following me. Uncle Sweyn told you about the postmark on my letter to him, I presume? — so, if he told *you*, he's probably told *her*, and that's a beastly bind.'

'He did not say anything about a postmark, so far as I am aware, but he seemed to have a pretty good idea of where you were,' said Laura.

'Yes, I asked *him* for a small loan, too, and he was obliging enough to cough up. Anyway, I've got a job now, so I'm all right for the time being, although how long I'll stick it I don't know. This is a dead and alive hole, but no worse than Leyden Hall, I suppose. Give me Amsterdam every time, unless I could live in London. How are they all at home?'

'Naturally, rather worried about you.'

'Granduncle?'

'Rather grieved, but I think he'd get over it if you went back and made your peace with him. He's very fond of you, you know.'

'Not since he caught me trying to pick his pocket. Not a hope, though, the wily old fox! You'd have thought he'd guessed what I was up to, and was ready to pounce!'

'We had an idea that it wasn't just the sculpture and the painting.'

'It was modelling, not sculpture. Have you seen the bust?'

'Yes, but not to any real advantage. I didn't have time. Anyway, I thought they had put it on too high a shelf to show it off properly.'

'Oh, that's my aunt Opal. No artistic sense whatsoever. Perhaps she wanted it out of sight, out of mind. Still, it's not a bad likeness, is it?'

'From what I saw, I should call it an excellent likeness,' said Laura. 'What did you mean when you said old Mr van Zestien caught you picking his pocket?'

Florian laughed and grimaced.

'He always keeps some of his best diamonds in the house. I've often thought of helping myself to a few, but always lacked the nerve. That business of Binnie entangling herself with that cad Bernardo, and the obvious good it was going to do them with the old man, made me see red, though, and I decided that if I couldn't get my hooks on his dough in one way, I'd get it in another. I didn't see why I shouldn't help myself to some of what, after all, was my own.'

'Oh, dear!' said Laura; not that she felt any pity for Florian. 'I'm afraid you've messed things up rather badly for yourself.'

'Unfortunately you're right. The old man caught me in the act, absolutely red-handed, and took the discovery in a very big way, so I made tracks for Grandma and the aunts and decided to remain away from Norfolk until the thing

blew over and Granduncle's natural affection for me reasserted itself.'

'Well, that process seems well on the way. I understand now why he was so upset and ill. You let him down with a pretty heavy thud, didn't you?'

Florian did not answer this. He said:

'Once the bust and the picture were finished, I cut loose from the aunts. Now I think I shall hang on here for a bit and wait for Time, the great healer, to put in some really good work. Then I'll do a prodigal son act, and go back (I hope) to the fatted calf and the welcome home.'

'Who is this girl you took with you to look at the Eldon Hole?' asked Gavin suddenly. Florian did not appear to be surprised by the question.

'Oh, more or less the local beauty queen,' he replied. 'Name of Gertie Something-or-Other.'

'A tart?'

'Good heavens, no! Virtuous as they come, unfortunately. Her boy-friend kicked up rough, and so I've dropped her.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

No Stone Unturned

‘His relations will thank you for any such gratuitous attention: at least they will not blame you for any evil that will happen, whether they thank you or not for any good.’

Dr Samuel Johnson



Gavin returned to his job and Laura reported to Dame Beatrice, who communicated the news forthwith to Florian’s relatives.

‘So he isn’t dead, *or* in the Dolomites,’ she remarked, when she had sent off the messages.

‘Why did I ever think he might be dead?’ Laura enquired.

‘The indications seemed to you to point that way, child. They may soon do so again, for all I know. One thing seems to me sinister.’

‘Cheers! What would that be?’

‘His aunt Opal’s infatuation. It is abnormal, and, I think, unnatural.’

‘And somebody else may not like it. Well, that might be Ruby or it might be Binnen. I suppose, at a longish shot, it could even be Binnie.’

‘Then there is the bust. You said it had been placed on a high shelf.’

‘So high that I had to stand on tip-toe to get a squint at it before Professor Sweyn lifted it down. They can’t value it much to stick it almost out of sight.’

‘How was the room lighted?’

‘One window, and somebody had draped a black curtain over half of it.’

‘On a high shelf in a half-lighted room, in fact.’

‘The *Queen’s Song*, you mean? Flecker?’

‘Such is my impression. And she, you remember, wanted to turn her young courtier’s head to gold, with the Midas touch.’

‘What can we do about it?’

‘Until we are certain who the “queen” is, and whether, like the Queen in the poem, she expresses a wish which she has neither the means nor the intention of

carrying out, or whether she has decided to allow the bust to take the place of the living being, there is very little we can do. It would be fantastic even to warn the young man.'

'All the same, we can hold a watching brief, I suppose. If there *is* any funny business afoot, it must be something to do with Grandmother Binnen's household.'

'I believe so, if we have argued the matter correctly.'

'Trouble is, they haven't done anything wrong yet. There's nothing we could possibly pin on them, as you say. I was hoping somebody had taken a chance of shoving Florian into the Eldon Hole, but there was nothing doing, and Gavin (the silly old hen) wasn't agreeable when I wanted to climb down and look for the body.'

'Ah, I knew our dear Robert would not allow you to get into mischief. Well, now, the watching brief you suggest is not likely to get us very far. Now that Florian is found, our position in the matter—'

'Yes, we can hardly go up to old Binnen and tell her we know that either she or one of her daughters means to murder Florian and so they'd better watch their step because Hawk-eye is on their trail.'

'Out of the question, as you say, child.'

'Not that Florian would be much loss to society,' observed Laura, 'but if he *is* in danger, oughtn't we to by-pass Binnen and the aunts and take Bernardo into consideration? I mean, old Mr van Zestien has definitely been doing what you might call some "in and out running" with respect to where he's going to leave his fortune. Isn't it possible that Bernardo might think it a good thing to bump off Florian and so leave the way clear for himself?'

'I think it would be out of character in Bernardo, but that the prospect of a large inheritance — or, sometimes, even a small one — can be a great incentive to murder, I agree.'

'You see, I can't help remembering that dinner party at Leyden Hall, after which Florian took that toss down the stairs. Simply practically everybody in the family was present. Of course, the whole thing *could* have been an accident. Florian thought so himself. All the same, it was a possible attempt to do for him, I suppose,' said Laura.

'The bust was not finished and the painting of the hand and flower not even begun, you know,' Dame Beatrice pointed out.

Laura saw the force of this remark. She said:

'I've been thinking over something Gavin said. If it *was* a bit of dirty work,

what price old Rebekah? Oh, I know she amuses you, and you think she's the salt of the earth, and all that kind of thing, but you also think she's crazy about Bernardo. After all, she's also crazy about money. Isn't there a chance that she'd like to put Florian out of the way? What about a put-up job between her and Bernardo to make sure of the inheritance for the latter? I mean, he could always give her her cut after he'd collected the boodle. I should think her expectation of life is considerably greater than that of old van Zestien.'

Dame Beatrice regarded her secretary with tolerant affection.

'And what do you make of the *really* dark horse of the family?' she enquired.

'Is there one?'

'Surely. Always present, mostly silent, an observer, not a participant.'

'Oh, the civilised, sophisticated Petra. I'd certainly never thought of *her*! But what would be her motive?'

'She would have the same motive as her mother, the right to expect a rich gift from the grateful heir. Added to that, she has, we may presume, a much longer expectation of life even than Rebekah, and therefore would have more time in which to relish and enjoy her ill-gotten gains'.

'It's quite an idea.' admitted Laura. She stared suspiciously at her employer. 'All the same, I think you're pulling my leg.'

'Perish the thought, dear child. We must explore all avenues and leave no stone unturned.'

'Now I *know* you're pulling my leg.'

Derde acknowledged Dame Beatrice's communication with a grateful letter of thanks. He had written to his father to tell him where Florian was, and had begged him to take the young man back, stressing that Florian should be given an allowance large enough to put the temptation of stealing the diamonds completely out of his way.

'So I suppose we were right to tell Professor Derde the truth,' commented Laura, to whom Dame Beatrice had dictated the letter which had gone to the University of Groningen. 'Of course,' she added suddenly, 'I *did* find Sweyn messing about in Binnen's apartment in Amsterdam, didn't I? You don't suppose —? I mean, I know all about the supposed unworldliness of the two professors, and I've subscribed to it, but, all the same, if one, at least, of old van Zestien's wills had stood the test of time, Derde and Sweyn would have been sitting quite pretty, wouldn't they?'

'Dear me!' said Dame Beatrice. 'Is *any* member of the family left out of your suspicions?'

‘Oh, yes. Florian’s and Binnie’s father and mother, and Binnie herself, of course. None of them could have had the slightest reason for wanting Florian out of the way.’

‘Not even Binnie, so that, as Bernardo’s wife, she came in for her share of the inheritance? You did suggest that once, if I remember aright.’

Laura grinned, but declined to answer. The next communication came from old Mr van Zestien, whose grand-nephew had returned. Florian, it appeared, had now decided to study art in Norwich. He would live at Leyden Hall and travel to Norwich each day in the car which his granduncle was giving him as a token that all was forgiven and forgotten. Binnie had also rejoined the household and would be married to Bernardo in the summer.

‘Mr van Zestien sounds happy again,’ said Laura, as she handed back the letter, ‘bless his old heart! I wonder whether Binnen and the aunts know that Florian has been reinstated, and I also wonder whether a new will is to be made?’

Answers to these questions came a little later from Sweyn, who (as he explained in his letter) often visited Binnen from the University of Amsterdam — as often, that was, as his duties would permit. He had told her and his cousins of Florian’s return to the fold and added in the letter, with unexpected cynicism, (born of blighted hopes, suggested Laura), that he had no doubt that Florian had contrived to strike a bargain with his granduncle.

‘That certainly means a new will,’ pronounced Laura. ‘No wonder Florian’s got that foxy smile!’

‘Wolfish smile,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘If what you suggest is true, Bernardo’s fortune may not turn out to be so great, after all. I wonder whether he knows that?’

‘Bound to, I should think. Binnie’s sure to know, and, that being so, I bet she’s lost no time in communicating the unwelcome tidings to her loved one.’

‘I do not think she is unduly mercenary. She may have been instrumental in persuading Bernard van Zestien to include her brother in the new will as a surety for his good behaviour, you know.’

‘Florian’s bargaining-point, too, I don’t doubt. Ah, well, our connection with the houses of van Zestien, Colwyn-Welch and Rose appears to be over. Among the correspondence this morning there are several invitations for Christmas week and the New Year. You’d better look them over and see who’s going to collect the wooden spoon.’

A few days passed. Dame Beatrice did some routine clinical work, Laura

some equally routine office work. Then came the letter from Gavin and a copy of a local paper.

‘Read where I’ve marked,’ commanded Laura’s husband. ‘We have been called in by the local police. They’ve lost the scent — if there ever *was* any. It seems a most mysterious business. Anyway, my address, at present, is the one at the top of this letter. Will let you know if and when I move from it.’

‘Dashed rummy,’ commented Laura. She handed the letter and the copy of the local paper to her employer. They were at breakfast in the high-ceilinged dining-room of Dame Beatrice’s Kensington house. The marked column was on the front page and, moreover, had pride of place by being in the heaviest type. ‘Gavin’s got a job on, I should say. This pub is the one where we had a drink that day and, although I don’t know the name, there was only one barmaid there, so far as I know, so this dead woman must be she.’

‘Hydrocyanic acid,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Hardly the most likely poison to be obtained in a small country town, let alone in a village. I see that an inquest has been held and that the jury have returned an open verdict. The police are continuing to investigate the matter.’

‘That means they’re not satisfied,’ said Laura, unnecessarily. ‘What’s more, a barmaid being more or less of a public character, anyone could have murdered her. I mean, you can’t exclude a jealous boy-friend and her dearest relations, of course, but it could just as easily be one of the customers.’

‘Motive?’

‘She’d spotted him passing betting-slips or treating somebody under eighteen to a drink in the bar,’ said Laura readily. Dame Beatrice cackled.

‘As motives for murder, they seem to me inadequate,’ she said.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ retorted Laura. ‘I’ve heard you say, yourself, and more than once, that there’s no such thing as an inadequate motive. If it seems adequate to the perpetrator, then it’s adequate and no more questions need be asked. *Haven’t* you said so?’

‘*Touché!*’ admitted Dame Beatrice.

‘I mean, suppose it was the local vicar,’ argued Laura, pressing home her advantage, ‘and she’d blackmailed him, or threatened to get up in the middle of Matins (which all country people are apt to attend because the pubs don’t open until twelve on a Sunday, whereas they’re all open at seven on Sunday evenings, right in the middle of the Nunc Dimittis or something) and denounce him to the congregation. She might even have threatened to report him to his bishop, and that certainly would have peeled the orphreys off his chasuble, or whatever it is.’

‘One thing,’ remarked Dame Beatrice, gazing at her secretary across the table with fascinated admiration. ‘Whatever virtue there may be in your processes of thought, there is no doubt about the source of your expressive and unlikely metaphors.’

‘Do we toddle up to Derbyshire and have a look-see? — or would that hamper Gavin in the execution of his duties?’ demanded Laura.

‘I really think it might. Far better, I think, to interview Florian.’

‘What could *he* know about it? You don’t think *he* poisoned the poor girl, do you?’

‘No, I don’t think he did, except inadvertently — but, of course, one never knows.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘What I mean is that this girl’s death, and the manner of it, have started in me a train of thought, but, as I may be making wild guesses, I prefer to disclose nothing until I have proved or disproved my conclusions.’

Leyden Hall was on the telephone. Binnie took Dame Beatrice’s personal call.

‘Come and see Florian? Yes, of course you may,’ she said. ‘Hold on a minute, please, Dame Beatrice. I’ll just have a word with Granduncle and let him know you’re coming.’

Arrangements were soon concluded, and two days later George was driving Dame Beatrice to North Norfolk. Laura was left behind and was bidden to go down to the Stone House, where Dame Beatrice would join her later and would furnish her with any news she had been able to gather from Florian.

In North Norfolk an autumn snap was in the air and the ducks and swans on the lake, into which Florian had plunged after his passage-at-arms with Bernardo, looked unhappy, Dame Beatrice thought. The deciduous trees in the wood that led down to the river had shed most of their leaves; horse-chestnut burrs were on the ground and the grass of the lawn was damp and rough. George drove round to the front of the house and Dame Beatrice rang a jangling bell. A maidservant showed her into the library and announced her. Florian and his granduncle got up out of deep chairs. Binnie ran forward with outstretched hands.

It was not until after dinner that the object of the visit was announced. Then, when coffee had been cleared away and they were again in the library and were seated around a coal fire (it was so much cosier in the library than in the enormous drawing-room upstairs, Binnie had said), Dame Beatrice produced the

newspaper she had brought with her. She passed it straight to Florian.

‘Did you know this girl?’ she asked. Florian, frowning, read the marked column.

‘Not by name, but I must have had drinks in her bar,’ he said. ‘How on earth did she get herself poisoned? The beer was all right, so far as I could find out.’

‘Did she ever seem apprehensive in any way?’

‘Only that if anybody else in the pub was ill — the landlord’s wife had a pretty bad cold while I was there — she might have to lose her evening out and have to disappoint her boy-friend.’

‘Did you ever meet him?’

‘Oh, yes. They used to exchange sweet nothings over the counter and one evening she introduced me. He was a very harmless bloke. The local postman, as a matter of fact.’

‘Did you ever see him give her anything?’

‘You mean a nice packet of poison? No, I can’t say I ever did. Oh, wait a minute, though. He used to bring her sweets. She had a very great liking for sweets, although she said it was death to her figure to eat them.’

‘That may well have been true.’

‘Oh, terribly sorry, and all that! I shouldn’t have put it in those words. I didn’t think. I was only quoting the poor girl herself, you know.’

‘Let me see that newspaper,’ said Bernard van Zestien, stretching out a hand towards his grandnephew. Florian handed it to him. He perused the column and passed the paper to Binnie, who read the marked passage and gave the paper back to Dame Beatrice. Then he demanded of Florian, ‘You say this woman liked sweets?’

‘Very much indeed. Always kept a bag of them under the counter. Peppermint flavour mostly. Ugh! Fancy peppermints mixed up with beer!’

‘Did you ever offer this woman sweets?’

‘Me? Good heavens, no! Why should I? The most I did on her behalf was to buy her a half-pint when I was ordering my second one.’

‘That’s well,’ said the old man. ‘You’ve been a foolish boy, but you’re all I have, now that my little Binnie is to be married.’ He chuckled. ‘I wonder whether Rebekah is yet reconciled to the match?’

‘If she is, it’s more than I am,’ muttered Florian. The big Don Juan!’

‘He isn’t,’ said Binnie. ‘Don’t be silly, Florian. I should have to get married some day to someone, so it might just as well be to Bernie as to anybody else. What do *you* say, Dame Beatrice?’

‘That any man who is kind, and any woman who is reasonable, can get on very well together, I think.’

‘So there it is,’ said Dame Beatrice to Laura, upon her return. ‘We are a little further forward, although not very much.’

‘I don’t see any progress, I’m afraid. In fact, I don’t mind telling you that I’m in an absolute fog.’

‘That will not help us to elucidate the matter. I am thinking of old Mr van Zestien’s question to Florian.’

A report in next morning’s paper did not help them, either. A second death in the same part of Derbyshire, and of another barmaid at another public house, had given the London reporters an interest in the first one.

‘Blimey!’ exclaimed Laura, perusing the details. ‘I say, Mrs Croc. do you know what? Another girl has died from prussic acid poisoning in practically the same spot on the map. What are we to make of that, I wonder?’

‘I think we will wait for another communication from Robert before we make anything of it, although it is obvious what must have happened,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘They shared some poisoned sweets? That’s what you meant about old Bernard’s question to Florian? Could be, of course, but who’d want to poison two simple village maidens? Rural England is getting beyond a joke!’

‘Rural England has always been beyond a joke where violent death is concerned, child. Do you not remember Sherlock Holmes’ famous dictum? That more dark deeds were committed in the lonely countryside than ever took place in the London slums was his opinion, and I do not think he was altogether wrong.’

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gavin Reports

‘This digression, I trust, will not be censured, as it relates to a matter exceedingly curious...’

James Boswell



During the weeks that followed, Gavin wrote letters to Laura as often as his work permitted. Laura invariably passed these epistles over to Dame Beatrice, realising that the information contained in them was intended as much for her employer as for herself. Summarised, and then expanded into a connected narrative of events, they provided a dullish but credible story.

In spite of the open verdict at the inquest on the first barmaid, the local police had decided to treat the case as one of murder. The death of the second girl justified them, they felt, in coming to this decision, since there seemed no reason to suspect that a suicide pact had been made between the two young women.

‘Of course there hadn’t,’ commented Gavin, on this. ‘Girls of this kind don’t make suicide pacts with one another. They leave that to crazy mixed-up boy and girl adolescents who think they’re in love.’

Gavin had been well received by the Superintendent with whom he was to work, and all the available data were placed at his disposal. There was not a great deal to be learned. The girls were friendly towards one another, exchanged confidences about their boy-friends but were in no sense in rivalry with regard to these. The first barmaid had her postman and the other girl had an understanding with a builder’s labourer in Glossop. There was no mention made of Florian’s virtuous Gertie.

The vehicle by which the poison had been administered was another matter for speculation. Enquiries at chemists’ shops over the widest possible area failed to produce any evidence of a purchase of hydrocyanic acid, and all the poisons books were guiltless of any record of a sale which could not be checked.

Gavin, not for the first time, tackled the landlady who had employed Effie,

the first girl, and then the landlord of the public house at which the second barmaid had worked. He met with the same blank wall in both cases. He thought that the landlady might be unreliable, but he was convinced that the landlord was clear-sighted, puzzled and worried.

‘She was such a sensible lass,’ he insisted upon repeating. ‘She wouldn’t have fallen for any funny stuff, sir, I know she wouldn’t. A sensible, level-headed lass, if ever there was one. In the bar here since she was one-and-twenty, as I won’t have them younger than that, being a married man with growing-up daughters of my own. Oh, a pleasant-spoken, up-to-the-minute girl, of course she was. You don’t want a deaf-mute behind a bar counter, now do you, sir? But a good girl — church-goer and all that, when she could attend out of licensing hours — yes, I’ll swear to that. A good girl she was.’

Nothing was to be gained, Gavin thought, from this kind of asseveration. He made further enquiries, but always came to the same dead end. There was no reason whatsoever, it seemed, why anybody should have wished either barmaid any harm.

He turned his attention particularly to the case of the second girl, because she did not live in, as Effie did, but here, again, there seemed nothing to learn which could shed any light upon the reason or reasons for her apparently untimely end. The two girls, as he had already been told, had been friendly, a relationship which dated back to their schooldays and which had persisted probably because they lived in the same part of the county. The second girl was named Mabel and her boy-friend, the builder’s labourer, was called Mervyn. His help was enlisted, but proved abortive, Mabel had no enemies, she was ‘not the quarrelsome sort’, had no troubles, so far as he knew, was ‘about the last to want to *do* for herself’, and had had an understanding, ‘but nothing definite, sir,’ with himself for the past two years.

He did not seem unduly cast down by her death, Gavin thought. Possibly he was relieved (illogical though it was) at being rid of an acquaintance who ‘got herself done in with prussic acid’. Gavin visited his home and questioned his parents and his sister. These were adamant on the question of Mervyn’s being ‘a good boy’, and one quite free from any suggestion of having brought about ‘funny business’ in connection with Mabel, an euphemism, obviously, for what, in other parts of the country, was referred to as ‘trouble’.

His mind, his mother stated, was on his work. He was saving hard, with the idea of starting out on his own as a free-lance plumber, builder and decorator. He had ‘learned the plastering’, had a good head for heights, could ‘do chimneys

and that' and, in other words, (said Gavin, discussing the case over a pint of beer in the Superintendent's home, where he had been invited to stay while enquiries were in progress), was a man with an eye to a future which might, or might not, have included Mabel.

Gavin tried the boy's employers. They managed and ran a smallish, prosperous, up-to-date business with showrooms in Glossop and a respectable turn-over. There was a girl to take orders and make promises of possible dates for work to commence in customers' houses, for, although they referred to themselves as builders, their contracts, they told Gavin, were almost exclusively concerned with repairs, renovations and improvements to existing property, and there was a full-time plumber, the hall-mark of a prosperous small business.

They knew nothing of Mabel. Their employees' private affairs were nothing to do with them, provided that punctuality, sobriety and dependability were not sabotaged in any way. Yes, Mervyn was a reliable chap. They had employed him for the past eight years. No, he had not served an apprenticeship. He was not a brick-layer or in a union. He had applied to them for a job upon leaving school, had seemed a willing youngster and they had always been satisfied with him. He had picked up the work as he went along, and had developed into a useful, all-round man.

'Nothing more to be had from them,' said Gavin, to the Superintendent. 'There's only one conclusion to come to, and that is that these young women were poisoned by accident.'

'Prussic acid isn't exactly an accident,' protested the Superintendent, 'but I take your point. Somehow or other, they swallowed stuff that was intended for somebody else. But how would that have been possible?'

'Sweets,' said Gavin. 'Somebody quite innocently fed them poisoned sweets. That's the only conclusion I can come to.'

'Quite innocently, you think?'

'Yes, I do. What's more, I think I may know who it was. The trouble will be to make him come clean.' (He had had the thought of poisoned sweets from Dame Beatrice.)

'Well, it can't be a nice thought to know you've poisoned two girls, however much of an accident it may have been. Whom have you got in mind, Mr Gavin?'

'A young man named Colwyn-Welch, who was staying down here for a while to study limestone caverns and so forth, and worked in a garage. Mind you, I've no evidence that he did anything more than buy some girl an occasional half-pint. Of course, he may sometimes have treated the barmaid to a

beer—’

‘And she’d have pulled that for herself.’

‘Yes. As I say, *if* he poisoned the girls I can’t help feeling that it was unintentional, and it’s quite likely he didn’t, at that. But if the poison wasn’t acquired locally, it must have come from outside the district. You and I have both made the most exhaustive enquiries about strangers coming into the neighbourhood, and, except for this youth, have drawn a blank.’

‘Some of these commercial travellers are not all they claim to be, Mr Gavin.’

‘I know. But, there again, we’ve combed out Glossop and got damn-all. I’m going to have another word with the landlady of that pub — the other chap, the landlord, obviously knows nothing — and then I’ll have another go at Effie’s postman friend, and, if that brings nothing new, I’m off to Norfolk.’

The landlady could do no more than confirm that the barmaid had had a sweet tooth. She had kept chocolate peppermint-creams under the counter most days and would sometimes offer one to a favourite customer. Yes, the landlady herself had often accepted one. When she had had her last bad cold she could taste the peppermint when she could not rightly taste anything else, without it might be a hot whisky and lemon. She knew of no strangers, commercials or otherwise, coming to the bar, except the young gentleman with a double-barrelled name who had quarrelled with his folks, the landlady thought, and was waiting for things to blow over. In fact, he had said as much to Effie and was keeping himself by working in the local garage, which it did seem a pity to get those nice hands — ‘more like a young girl’s they were’ — all messed up with oil and stinking of petrol and that. However, he had gone home now. All must have been forgiven and forgotten. Yes, he had been gone quite a day or two before Effie took poison and died. She *had* wondered whether Effie had gone and fallen for him in any way. It would not have been surprising, so good-looking and beautifully-spoken he was.

‘But what about the other girl?’ Gavin asked. ‘That’s why we are inclined to rule out suicide, you see. It’s not very likely they both committed suicide, is it? Do you know anything about the other girl at all? What about *her*?’

‘Ah, yes, Mabel,’ said the landlady, and sighed. ‘That’s more of a mystery, that is. If Mabel met the gentleman once, it was (so far as anything *I* knew) the only time, unless, of course, there was something underhand going on.’ (This, again, was reiteration, and Gavin sighed inwardly, thanked her and went off to have his fourth interview with the postman boy-friend).

He was fortunate enough to find this youth off-duty and anxious to discuss a

new theory.

‘Look,’ said the postman, ‘there’s this dog, see?’

‘What dog?’

‘This Great Dane. Used to frighten me, it did. Big as a young calf, and savage! — well, I couldn’t tell you! I says to the sub-postmaster, I says, “I ain’t a-going nigh that there Hound o’ the Basketvill”, I says, “not if the Postmaster-General hisself was to go on his bended knees to me,” I says. “That dog,” I says, “ain’t one of the ’azards as I’m called upon to face,” I says. “Terriers, yes,” I says. “Them you can fend off. Mongrels, yes,” I says. “Friendly, most mongrels is. Boxers, grey’ounds, even collies, (although they can be treacherous), yes,” I says. “Pekes, Poms, Labradors, setters, bulldogs, Bostons — I’ve, even knowed a nice-natured Rhodesian ridgeback *and* a well-be’aved Alsatian-all of them,” I say, “and welcome, but a Great Dane no! Anyway, not this partic’lar one. He’s a maneater, that’s what he is.” But the sub-postmaster don’t see it my way.’

‘You mean you refused to deliver letters to this particular house?’ asked Gavin.

‘I made my protest, but the sub-postmaster, he says as how my duty has to come first. I’m paid and employed to deliver letters and parcels, he says, and dogs is beside the point. Dogs, he says, is an occupational ’azard, and owners can be summoned for keeping a savage animal, or one not under control. “And how’s that going to help, if I gets bit and contracts ’ydrophobia?” I asks him; but he don’t shift his opinion.’

‘How does this get us any further?’ asked Gavin. The postman looked surprised. He was a moon-faced, pop-eyed youth who had no difficulty in expressing this reaction.

‘I’m a-telling you,’ he said. ‘I discusses the problem with Effie and *she* says as how a dog o’ that sort could do with a dose of poison. I reckon she must have tried it on to help me out, but somewhere it misfired and got *her* instead o’ the dog.’

Gavin made a note, thanked him gravely, said he would look into the matter and went back to the Superintendent.

‘Would you know where this ferocious dog hangs out?’ he asked lightly. The Superintendent grinned.

‘That will be Mrs Hitchcock’s Marmaduke,’ he said. ‘Harmless as a kitten. Probably thinks he *is* one. I shouldn’t waste your time there, Mr Gavin.’

But Gavin was thorough, in spite of his secret amusement when he thought over the conversation with the postman. He obtained Mrs Hitchcock’s address

and went along immediately after tea.

The door was opened by a wispy woman who had an intelligent face. She was accompanied by an extremely large dog which immediately put its forepaws on Gavin's shoulders and gave his face an ecstatic and all-embracing lick.

'I don't really want to buy anything just at present,' said the woman. The dog got down and regarded Gavin with sentimental affection.

'I am a police officer, madam,' said Gavin, putting a hand on the dog's head. 'I have been apprised of the fact that your dog is dangerous.'

'What, Marmaduke? (We call him that after that adorable dog in the newspaper). Marmaduke *dangerous*! He's a simple love! Simple-minded, too!'

'Yes,' said Gavin. 'May I come in?'

'Well,' said the woman doubtfully, 'I suppose so, if you really want to. My husband doesn't like me to admit strangers. The last one was the electricity. Only, he wasn't, you see. The gas men you can be pretty sure of, because of the uniform, but the electricity only seem to carry those awfully thick notebooks. Still, if Marmaduke likes you, it will be all right, I suppose. On guard,' she added, addressing the dog. The dog careered up the stairs and came down again in a slither on his stomach. Mrs Hitchcock led the way into the drawing-room. Several half-finished paintings lay about, propped against bookcases and armchairs, and a half-dressed doll was lounging on the settee. Mrs Hitchcock cleared a space. Gavin produced his credentials, as a matter of form. Mrs Hitchcock waved them aside.

'Have you had tea?' she asked. 'Oh, you have? That's a good thing, because we never have it, but, of course, I would have got you some if you'd wanted it.'

'Thank you,' said Gavin, offering her a cigarette, 'I came to ask whether anybody had ever threatened, or attempted to poison, your dog.'

'What, Marmaduke?' repeated the lady. The dog ambled up to Gavin and lay down on his feet. Gavin extricated his members. '*Poison* him?' pursued Mrs Hitchcock. 'But he's the dearest love in the world! Who on earth would want to harm him?'

The dog raised a paw and whacked it down on her lap.

'The postman seems afraid of him,' said Gavin. The dog snorted, stretched himself on the carpet and filled the air with the sound of canine, contented sleep. Gavin gave up his mission, took his leave and went back to the Superintendent.

'Nobody tried to poison him,' he said. 'The dog's mentally afflicted. A little child could feed him prussic acid and the dog would swallow it with kisses. Norfolk it is, for me, I'm afraid. You might wish me luck. I'll be back as soon as

there's news — if any.'

'Half a minute, Mr Gavin,' said the Superintendent. 'You've rung a bell in my mind. May be nothing in it at all, but you mentioned poison and a dog, and that brings something back to me. That second girl, Mabel, kept a dog, and when I called to see the poor mother, dashed if I could make out whether she was crying more for her daughter or for the tyke.'

'Good Lord!' exclaimed Gavin. 'That might account for something that's been nagging at me ever since I came down here.'

'Yes, Mr Gavin?'

'If the poison was conveyed in some form of sweet-stuff — in fact, however it was conveyed — we ought to be able to trace the vehicle, you know. Most of the sweets that adults buy for themselves are wrapped. In fact, lots of things are packaged nowadays which used not to be. Of course, we don't know yet *what* the vehicle was which contained the poison, but, if you don't mind — I mean, you're certain to have covered the ground and all that — but I wouldn't mind having a go at Mabel's mother myself.'

'I'll get Constable Mead to drive you there at once.'

The house was an unpretentious, semi-detached affair on the Glossop-Sheffield road, some distance away from the village. Gavin introduced himself as a police officer and was invited in. The room was tidy but needed dusting. The woman was grey-haired and untidy and her apron could have been cleaner. She appeared conscious of these minor defects, swept the hem of her apron over the wooden arms of a grandfather Windsor chair and said:

'The place is rare and mucky, but I've lost my prop and stay, as you might put it.'

'I'm very sorry indeed. And you've lost your dog, too, so I hear,' said Gavin. The soiled hem of the apron was applied to the woman's eyes.

'He laid down and died next to Mabel,' she said. 'Died of grief, poor old Toby did. That's what he done — died of grief.'

'Yes. Where did you bury him?'

'Out the back. My neighbour came and done it after he'd gone for the doctor to see after Mabel.'

'Whereabouts was the dog buried? You see, Mrs Sims, I don't think the dog died of grief. I think he ate something your daughter ate, and died of poisoning, just as she did. Can you think of anything they might have shared? That particular poison acts very quickly. Were you at home at the time?'

'Which I was not. I got a little job to go to — oh, not enough to upset my

pension nor nothing like that, but you know how it is with widows with an only daughter. There don't be much coming in, and what with the rent and one thing and another, well, you see how it would be, and I would never be one to break the law or take a chance, or nothing like that...'

'No, no, I'm sure not. Look, Mrs Sims, we must have your dog dug up again. It may be very important. I want you to stay indoors and not to worry, and as soon as we've finished with Toby we'll bury him again in the same spot, and you'll never know he's been disturbed.'

'If you say so, sir,' agreed Mrs Sims, on whom Gavin's charm and good looks had made an extremely favourable impression.

'And you have no idea what your daughter and Toby may both have eaten which proved fatal to them?'

'I haven't no idea in this world. Of course Toby — I'm not saying he was a greedy dog, mind you; he was too well fed for that — but he tended to gollop.'

'Gollop?'

'Yes, *you* know — gollop. Swallowed things wholesale. He golloped a lump of steak once as I'd got special of a Saturday to go with fried onions. I must say I did pay 'im for that. Well, I mean, you must learn 'em right from wrong, mustn't you? Paper and all he golloped that steak, and when I went to look for it to fry it, there was me lord on his belly underneath the kitchen table. "Oh, so that's where it is!" I says, and he couldn't deny it. Yes, a golloper, poor old Toby was — a real golloper.'

The unpleasant business of disinterring Toby was accomplished on the following day and his pathetic but by no means antiseptic remains were committed to the care of the district pathologist, the result of whose labours was interesting and instructive. Toby yielded an appreciable dosage of hydrocyanic acid, some undigested chocolate cream and enough silver foil for the forensic laboratory to decipher the letters RDAM on it.

'Clear enough,' said the Superintendent, apprised at (to his relief) fairly long range of these findings. 'Came from Holland, Mr Gavin, and I somehow fancy — you having sketched in Mr Colwyn-Welch's background for us — that you surmised it. Amsterdam, Rotterdam — what other Dutch dams are there?'

'Well,' said Gavin, who had taken more interest in his wife's visit to the Netherlands than she would have thought probable, 'there are Schiedam, Volendam, Monnikendam, Edam (where the cheese comes from), Zaandam and the miniature city — a show piece-of Madurodam, but these, you will note, lack the necessary R in the oyster months. No, Amsterdam or Rotterdam it is, so I'm

off to Norfolk, as I said.’

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A Delft Blue at Bay

‘Whatever he relates, whether true or not, is at least probable; and he who tells nothing exceeding the bounds of probability, has a right to demand that they should believe him who cannot contradict him.’

Dr Johnson



Gavin was indeed thorough. Before he went to Norfolk to interview a household which, by reason of family connections, might reasonably be supposed to obtain and consume Dutch confectionery, he investigated sweet-shops in the village and in Glossop and even in Sheffield and Buxton. Police were alerted in other towns and villages and were asked to make similar enquiries. There was evidence of the stockage and sale of Dutch plain chocolate and chocolate liqueurs, but Dutch chocolate-cream had not found its way into the neighbourhood.

‘It was only to carry out my wife’s rule-of-thumb,’ said Gavin to the Superintendent. ‘She believes in exploring all avenues and leaving no stone unturned. I didn’t expect to get anything around these parts. No, that poisoned stuff came from young Colwyn-Welch all right, and he’ll have to come clean about it. I’m quite prepared to believe that he gave it to the barmaid in all innocence. She must have passed on the major portion of it to Mabel Sims, whose dog, I make no doubt, wolfed up what remained of it after she dropped dead.’

‘Unless it came in the first place from Mabel Sims and she passed on a bit to Effie,’ the Superintendent suggested. ‘You see,’ he added, observing Gavin’s look of surprise. ‘I don’t suppose your good lady eats many sweets, Mr Gavin?’

‘No, she likes whisky and fruit — not both together, of course. Why?’

‘Well, in my experience, a woman will put aside a box of chocolates, we’ll say, and not touch it for, perhaps, quite a few days. Then she’ll eat the whole lot at one go.’

‘Where’s this getting us?’

‘Well, we’ve all taken it for granted that because Effie died first it was *her* bit of sweet-stuff that killed them both, but the chocolate-cream could just as easily have come from Mabel, who didn’t eat hers quite so soon. See what I mean?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Moreover,’ pursued the Superintendent, ‘it does seem as if Mabel had the bigger portion, if there was enough to poison her *and* the dog. Well, now, Mr Gavin, *you* know what people are like. We’re *all* like it, I dare say. Take cigarettes, for example. You might offer a cigarette, but you don’t offer half the packet.’

‘I take your point,’ said Gavin. ‘I’d better go and have another talk with Mrs Sims.’

Mrs Sims, however, banged the new theory very effectively on the head.

‘Mabel did show me a biggish bit of chocolate-cream, but it wasn’t the whole bar. You could see where it had been broke off. She offered me a bit, but I find it sickly, so I wouldn’t have any. I ask her where she got it — I see it was some foreign make — and she said as how her friend Effie, the other one as died — had give it to her. “She’s give you the biggest half, then,” I said. “Don’t she like it?” So Mabel says as how Effie broke off a bit and took a smell of it and says, “It smells of almonds, and I don’t like almond flavouring all that much, I only likes peppermint in chocolate-cream. ’Ere you are,” she says, “you ’ave the big bit what I was going to keep for meself. This bit’ll do me fine.” That’s what she said, so Mabel told me, sir.’

‘Not that it seems to me that it makes much difference which of them died first,’ said Gavin, upon returning to the Superintendent, ‘but it’s interesting they noticed the smell of almonds. I’ll just have another word with the landlady who keeps the pub where Effie worked.’

The landlady, it seemed, was on the local grapevine.

‘So it was that young fellow’s chocolate-cream,’ she said. ‘I never did care much about foreign sweets. Unwholesome, if you ask *me*. Give me good old English mint humbugs, or something of that! It was terrible, going into Effie’s room and finding her dead in bed. The light was on and her magazine had dropped on the floor, as she must have let go of it as she died.’

‘You say it was a young man’s gift to Effie, this chocolate-cream?’

‘Of course it was! Where else could it have come from? Of course he give it to her — oh, not meaning no harm, of course! I’m perfectly certain of that! Such a handsome young chap as he was!’

So Gavin went off to North Norfolk. He did not announce his coming, feeling that an element of surprise might well attend upon his arrival at Leyden Hall, and so it proved. He went by way of Buxton, Bakewell and Nottingham and then across to Grantham, Holbeach and King's Lynn, and arrived at Leyden Hall at six in the evening, a time at which he judged most, if not all, of the household would be at home.

His judgment was justified. He was shown up to the enormous drawing-room where Binnie was reading aloud to Bernard van Zestien and Florian was playing a complicated game of Patience at a small table on the opposite side of the hearth. He must have heard Gavin announced, but went on with his occupation without so much as raising his eyes. His granduncle called him to order.

'Florian! Here is Detective Chief-Inspector Gavin!'

Florian pushed the Patience cards aside and stood up.

'Hullo, Mr Gavin,' he said ungraciously. 'How do you do?'

'How do you do?' said Gavin. 'I'm here in my official capacity, I'm afraid.' He addressed the remark more to Bernard van Zestien than to Florian. The old man nodded.

'Are you any nearer to solving the mystery of the deaths of those unfortunate young women?' he asked.

'Well, we are and we're not,' Gavin replied. 'I wondered whether perhaps Mr Colwyn-Welch could give us a little more help.'

'I've told you all I know,' said Florian sullenly. 'I don't see what else you can ask me. I did know Effie, but, to the best of my knowledge, I've never spoken to, or set eyes on, the other girl.'

'Maybe not,' said Gavin, 'but that makes no difference to my present errand.' He turned to van Zestien. 'I wonder whether you'd permit me to have a word in private, sir?'

'With Florian? By all means.'

'Later, if you will, sir. I really meant, at the moment, with yourself.'

'With me? I shall be at a loss. I do not see what I can tell you. I was never in Derbyshire in my life.'

'If you will allow me, that is beside the point, Mr van Zestien.'

Binnie got up and put down the book from which she had been reading aloud.

'Come on, Florian,' she said. 'We're in the way. We'll be in the library, Granduncle, if you want to send for us.' She led the way out by the doorway which opened on to the staircase. With a very bad grace and a subdued

muttering, her brother followed her, slamming the door behind him.

‘Please be seated, Mr Gavin,’ said the old Netherlander. ‘Now, what can I tell you?’

‘I’d like to tell *you* something first,’ said Gavin. ‘It may make my questions seem less impertinent. We have discovered the vehicle by which the poison was conveyed to the two young women.’ He gave an account of the exhumation of Toby, and added, at the end of the recital, ‘Of course, the chocolate-cream may have been purchased in England, but, if it was, it seems unlikely that it was bought by these girls. We’ve done everything we can to trace a sale.’

The old man studied him. Then he said quietly:

‘My grandnephew is a foolish, weak, headstrong boy, Mr Gavin. I shall never believe he is a murderer.’

‘I agree, Mr van Zestien. Of course he is not a murderer. I am inclined to think, however, that he may have been a murderer’s intended victim.’

‘So! But who would want to kill Florian? With all his faults, he is harmless.’

‘So I firmly believe. Having admitted that, you must forgive me for asking my next question. I have reason to think, from what my wife has told me from time to time, that there have been occasions on which you have found it proper to alter your Will.’

‘There have. I have never made much of a secret about that.’

‘Quite so. May I ask—would you very much mind telling me—’

‘I have no objection at all to telling you how my Will stands at present. It can do no harm, so far as I can see.’

‘Thank you very much, sir. You are very good.’

‘My fortune and properties are now to be divided in equal parts between my grandnephew Florian Colwyn-Welch and Bernardo Rose. In the event (which Heaven forbid!) of one of them pre-deceasing me, his share will be divided in equal parts among my elder son Derde, (on the understanding that he will share it, as I know he will, with his brother Sweyn), my daughter Maarte Rose and my sister, Binnen Colwyn-Welch (who will leave all she has, I suppose, to her daughters). This Will is to be, I trust, my last.’

‘I see, sir. And do the beneficiaries and the possible beneficiaries know of these provisions?’

‘Yes, they do. At one time Florian, and at another time Bernardo, was to have been my sole legatee, but Florian was led into temptation. I need not particularise. It seemed reasonable, therefore, to exercise a little — how do you call it in English? — to give him a hope for the future provided that he behaved

himself and gave me no more distress of mind.'

'Benevolent blackmail, in fact.'

'Those are the words I wished to use. But where is all this tending?'

'I don't know yet,' said Gavin, untruthfully, thankful that the old man had not, so far, seen the point of the conversation. 'And now I wonder whether I might have a word with Mr Colwyn-Welch?'

'Certainly, if you will kindly ring the bell. I find that even a slight exertion makes me breathless, so, if you would not mind going down to the library and sending my grandniece to me — Oh, Carrie, take Mr Gavin to the library and ask Miss Binnie to join me here.'

Left alone with Florian, Gavin took out a notebook and seated himself at the library table.

'Now, then, young man,' he said, in business-like tones, 'I want some different answers from the ones you gave me last time.'

'There aren't any different answers,' Florian protested. Gavin tapped on the table with the top of a silver pencil.

'No?' he said pleasantly. 'Well, we can but try. You do realise, don't you, that the poisoned chocolate-cream was intended to kill *you*, and not those unfortunate girls?'

Florian went white. His lip quivered.

'Poisoned chocolate-cream?' he said huskily.

'Poisoned chocolate-cream. Dutch chocolate-cream. Chocolate-cream either from Amsterdam or Rotterdam, probably purchased out there and subsequently impregnated with hydrocyanic acid. Let me tell you a story. It is called, *The Dog It Was That Died*.' Without a glance at the young man, who, with shaking hands, was attempting to light a cigarette, he unfolded the saga of Toby the Golloper. There was a long silence when he had finished, except that Florian, having succeeded at last in lighting the cigarette, inhaled unwisely and was subjected to a fit of coughing. Gavin waited. The paroxysm over, Florian stared into the fire, his shoulder turned away so that Gavin could not see his face.

The battle of nerves came to a sudden end.

'All right, then,' said Florian, turning round. 'I did have some Dutch chocolate-cream. I did give it to the barmaid because I hate the muck and she was always eating sweets. But I didn't give anything to the other girl — I didn't even *know* the other girl — and I swear to you I had no idea the filthy stuff had poison in it!'

'That I'm prepared to accept, and there's no doubt that the poison was

intended for you.'

Florian flung his cigarette into the fire and put his head in his hands. Gavin waited again, but this time there was no tension in the silence. Florian raised his head.

'How much trouble is there in it for me?' he asked.

'I don't know,' said Gavin briskly, unwilling to let him off the hook until he had obtained from him what he wanted. 'Not a lot, I daresay, if you'll co-operate with us instead of treating us to another spate of lying and Artful Dodging. Where did the chocolate-cream come from?'

'I don't know, except from Holland. It came by post, with some Dutch cigars.'

'Any letter with it?'

'No, nothing except the parcel.'

'I suppose you didn't keep the wrappings?'

'No, of course not. It was only brown paper and so on.'

'Postmark?'

'I don't remember. It was put by my plate at lunch-time by my landlady, and I just tore it open to see what it was. I only had an hour between leaving the garage and getting back there, and I always liked to drop in for a beer on my way back. My landlady's only idea was a cup of tea, and I loathe tea, but one must drink something. Water isn't interesting, and nobody over here makes decent coffee.'

'Then did you hand over the chocolate-cream almost as soon as you received it?'

'Yes. I shoved it and the small box of cigars — there were only five of them — in my overalls pocket and when I got to the pub I handed the chocolate-cream to Effie. She said, 'Oh, ta, ducks, but I won't eat it now, if you don't mind. Got to have my dinner in a minute. Sure you wouldn't like to keep a bit of it for yourself? I'm not *all* that keen on chocolate-cream. It's apt to give me the bile.'

'That's why she gave most of it away to the other girl, then, so that takes care of that,' said Gavin. 'Now we come to the point. Who hates your guts sufficiently to want to murder you? Did you collect some Dutchman's girl-friend or fall foul of a secret society while you were in the Netherlands at any time?'

Florian rallied at the sound of the jesting tone. He smiled, showing wolfish teeth. Although Gavin had heard of this hideous smile from Laura, he was taken aback by it. He had not seen it before.

'I am circumspectness itself when I'm abroad,' said Florian, shutting off the

smile and returning his expression to its former innocence and beauty.

‘Well, who *would* want to kill you?’ asked Gavin. ‘One doesn’t have enemies one doesn’t know about. Come along! Two innocent women are dead, through no fault of their own, because they swallowed poison which was obviously intended for you. Don’t worry about getting somebody into trouble. Don’t you realise that, if we don’t lay hands on this joker, he’s going to try again?’

‘Well, if that’s it...’ said Florian. ‘No, dash it, I can’t! What if I should be wrong?’

‘*We’ll* sort that one out. Tell us what you suspect. Give us something to go on, however wrong you turn out to be.’

‘You’ll swear he’ll get a sporting chance? You won’t go and hang the wrong man?’

‘It’s clear to me that you don’t think it is the wrong man. In any case, I don’t suppose he’ll be hanged. They discriminate nowadays, you know.’

‘Oh, well, in that case... look here, I know jolly well who it was. It was my brute of a cousin, Bernardo Rose.’

‘Thanks,’ said Gavin, unemotionally. He made a note, got up, nodded to Florian and went up the stairs to Bernard van Zestien and Binnie.

‘Did you get what you wanted from Florian?’ the old man enquired. ‘Did he answer your questions?’

‘Yes, he was most informative,’ Gavin replied.

‘I am glad. He can be difficult and obstinate. Perhaps at last he is learning a little commonsense. You will stay for dinner, Mr Gavin?’

‘As Mr Gavin I should like very much to accept, sir. As Policeman Gavin, I’m afraid I must be on my way.’

He drove into Norwich, telephoned a long telegram from police headquarters there to the Superintendent in Derbyshire and booked a room for the night. In the morning, immediately after an early breakfast, he drove to Kensington and had lunch with Dame Beatrice and his wife.

‘So there it is,’ he said, when, after lunch, he had told his story. ‘I must look up Bernardo Rose’s address.’

‘It’s the same as old Rebekah’s, I expect,’ said Laura. ‘You’ll find that she and Petra and Bernardo and Bernardo’s father and mother all muck in together. What’ll you bet?’

No wager was made, but Laura turned out to be right, or near enough for Gavin’s convenience and purpose. The two households occupied identical service flats in Golders Green, one above the other in the same building. The

door was opened by Petra, whom he recognised from Laura's description. She was clad in what his old-fashioned, untutored mind informed him was a 'confection'. It was a pyjama-style *négligée* in rose-pink satin ornamented with silver sequins and, in Gavin's respectful opinion, it accorded well with her slightly olive complexion and lustrous, beautifully-dressed dark hair. She smiled at the handsome, manly visitor.

'Miss Rose, I believe,' said Gavin. 'I am a Scotland Yard police officer. I wonder whether I might have a word with your mother, Mrs Rebekah Rose?'

'Mother isn't up,' said Petra. 'Is it very important, or could you call again later?'

The point was settled by Rebekah herself, who yelled from somewhere inside the flat,

'Is a young man? I wish!'

'You had better come in then, Mr...'

'Gavin — Detective Chief-Inspector Gavin of New Scotland Yard. My card.'

'Oh — Gavin! Then you must be Mrs Gavin's husband?'

'Such is my lowly lot.' He was admitted to a room furnished in the Chinese style of the English eighteenth century — expensively furnished, at that. Rather gingerly he seated himself upon a part-wicker chair upholstered in a golden damask cloth bestrewn liberally with dragons. He gazed upon lacquer screens, priceless embroideries in frames on the walls and, in a cabinet whose legs were in the form of lions, a collection of Ming china of undoubted authenticity.

He was not left long in contemplation of these riches. The door burst open and in came the waddling but redoubtable figure of Rebekah, followed by that of her daughter. Unlike the elegant Petra, Rebekah was wearing a quilted dressing-gown in screaming green bice. This was topped by a mauve turban. She looked like a tipsy gipsy queen.

Gavin stood up. Rebekah toddled towards him on slipshod, be-feathered *mules* and gave him both her plump hands. Her rings made excruciating indentations on his fingers and palms.

'So much,' she shouted, 'how I like to see young men about my place. So should Petra marry one of you, so should I have him also with me. Platonic, of course. You think it over, perhaps?'

'I should be charmed,' said Gavin, with a gallant glance at Petra, 'but, unfortunately, I am already bespoke.'

'Ah, what is that "bespoke"? ' retorted Rebekah. 'So I am bespoke to a bargain Esau Levy offers me, but beats me to it that Jacob Bernstein, isn't it?'

You are believing the stories in what you are calling the Old Test, no?’

‘Well, I’ve read the story of Esau and Jacob,’ admitted Gavin cautiously, recognising the identity of the Old Test.

‘So comes round history. But am I defeated?’ Rebekah demanded.

‘I am sure you were not,’ said Gavin, who felt that this was indeed a certainty.

‘Just as this first Jacob is having to be scared for his life of this Esau, so I am scaring the pants off Jacob Bernstein. We are in America, visiting my son Philip and my other daughter Sarah, so I report Jacob Bernstein for spitting on the sidewalk.’ She chuckled richly.

‘Oh, dear!’ said Gavin, with becoming gravity. ‘Did he really do that?’

‘How should I know? I do not go with him on the sidewalk. But they are already wanting to get the goods on him in New York, so any excuse to arrest him, you see, and then grill him about what else he does besides spitting on sidewalks. Oh, they get plenty on him before he is through with them. It is costing him five thousand dollars in bribes before they stop grilling him and are putting him in the clear. He does not muscle in on my “bespoke” any more.’

‘I can’t say I blame him. Well, now, Mrs Rose—’

‘I sit down, so you can sit down, too,’ said Rebekah handsomely. ‘But please to lower yourself careful. This room is furnished by Petra. Interior decoration she is doing. I am paying the fees since six years. She studies here, she studies there — nothing but money to be found, and her father dead and an expensive funeral, nothing spared.’

‘You’ve been paid back with six per cent interest, you know, Mother,’ said Petra, smiling at Gavin. Rebekah gravitated, like an elephant perched on a medicine ball, and embraced her daughter warmly.

‘She is a good girl, and pays rent of this flat,’ she said, beaming. She released Petra, who calmly sat down. Rebekah followed suit and Gavin lowered himself carefully into the chair from which he had risen.

‘So now,’ said Rebekah, hopefully, ‘you are inviting us to visit your home in exchange hospitality, no?’

‘Well, not this time, I’m afraid,’ said Gavin tactfully. ‘This time I’m here on duty. I want to ask you a few questions, if you won’t mind.’

‘For Income Tax I have an accountant.’

‘No, no, it’s nothing like that. All I want to know is whether you spent the war years in England.’

‘Of Black Market I am also innocent.’

‘I bet you *weren’t*!’ thought Gavin. He said, ‘I am not attempting to accuse you of any offence whatever, Mrs Rose, but it will help me very much with a case on which I am engaged if you will just reply to my questions.’

‘He means it, Mother,’ said Petra, in her mild, sad tones. Rebekah inflated her bosom.

‘So shall I be slaughtered to do the police a good turn?’ she enquired grandly. ‘I am in England the whole of the war.’

‘Had you any relatives in Germany or in any of the Occupied countries?’

‘No, thank God, I had not. I do not count those Colwyn-Welch people. Anyway, they came to no harm except to be in among the bombs, but who was not? Opal and Ruby were interned — so they say! — but Binnen went underground and was heroine of Dutch Resistance — never caught.’

‘And your children?’

‘Petra here was sixteen when the war ended, Sarah, then married and all time in America, was thirty, and Philip, also in America and married, was twenty-six.’

‘He was drafted, then?’

‘Yes, but not to leave America. He has bad eyes. Good for clerical work (he pays so much for his glasses)-should be on National Health, like in England-but not the good eyesight for shooting people.’

‘Thank you very much, Mrs Rose. You’ve been extremely helpful.’

‘Now you tell me how comes this questioning.’

‘It’s top secret at present, but it may help us to get our hands on a very dangerous criminal.’

‘You are giving me police protection, then?’

‘Yes, if you like, but it isn’t really necessary. Even if the criminal finds out that I’ve been here, there wouldn’t be any indication that what you’ve told me might be material evidence, so don’t you worry.’

Petra showed him out.

‘I can see what you’re getting at,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ said Gavin. ‘I’m sorry it had to be so obvious. Don’t go in for too much family loyalty, though, will you?’

She smiled. She really was a most attractive woman, he thought, and much less of a dumb cluck than Laura had led him to believe. A modest, unassuming man in many ways, he did not allow for the influence of the accident of sex, or the determining factor of his own good looks and charm.

‘Family loyalty?’ said Petra. ‘I’d lie like a trooper for mother and my brothers and sister and their children, of course. Otherwise — in my mother’s

expression — phooey! And that goes for that horrible boy Florian.’

Gavin believed her and climbed to the flat above. This time the door was opened by a maid. Gavin gave his name and rank and asked whether Mr Bernardo Rose was at home. Before the girl could answer, Maarte Rose joined her in the outer vestibule.

‘What is it, Ethel?’ she asked. Gavin explained. Maarte dismissed the girl and looked at Gavin enquiringly.

‘My son is in no trouble?’ she asked. Gavin smiled.

‘I hope not,’ he said, ‘but I should be glad to have a word with him, if he is Mr Bernardo Rose.’

‘About what?’

‘About his movements during the past few weeks.’

‘But he has not been much in England during the past few weeks. We are in the diamond business and my son goes often to Amsterdam. It saves my husband the journey and leaves him free, also, to attend to the work on this side.’

‘Is your son in England now?’

‘Yes, but busy, very busy.’

‘In his office?’

‘In his office, yes.’

‘May I have the address, please?’

‘Not until I know why you want to see him.’ Her round, fair-complexioned face spelled obstinacy.

‘Well,’ said Gavin, ‘an accusation has been levelled against him, and I want...’

‘False! My son would do nothing against the law. We have a good name. It would not pay us to cheat people.’

‘I know. It is nothing to do with your family business. I’m sorry I can’t explain.’

‘I did not know that in England we have the secret police.’

‘Come, now, Mrs Rose, you’ll have to trust me. After I’ve spoken to your son he will be at perfect liberty to tell you anything he chooses about the interview, but, if we are to refute this charge which has been made against him, I really must see him. Don’t you understand that?’

Maarte studied him with solemn, unemotional blue eyes.

‘Please to come in,’ she said. ‘I will engage Bernardo upon the telephone and find out whether he is willing to speak to you.’

‘He’ll be very unwise if he refuses to speak to me,’ said Gavin, smiling at

her, but obtaining no response except the same direct and serious scrutiny. 'But, before you telephone, perhaps you would be kind enough to answer a question.'

'Perhaps. What is it? Please to sit down. Now?'

'In which country did you spend the war years?'

'In which country? Why, of course, here in England.'

'You were in England when war broke out?'

'Certainly! Since I was born I am living in England, so I was certainly here when war began.'

'Thank you. And your husband?'

'He and his family are English Jews since 1900.'

'Was he in the Army, then, during the war?'

'A gunner, yes.'

'A prisoner of war?'

'Oh, no, never a prisoner of war.'

'And Bernardo, I take it, was too young to fight?'

'Bernardo is a little boy of not quite two when war breaks out. He is a little boy evacuated to America, to my husband's sister, as soon as we think things may be bad.'

'I see. Thank you. That clears that up, then. Were any of your relatives still in Holland during the war?'

'Oh, yes. My aunt Binnen and my cousins, her daughters. They were interned, they say, and suffered hunger and bad treatment, but not my aunt. She was of the Dutch Resistance. We are proud of her.'

'Yes, of course you are. Now, if you wouldn't mind ringing up your son...'

He did not hear the conversation between Bernardo and his mother, as the telephone was not in the room where he was sitting, but Maarte came back after a surprisingly short absence and told him that Bernardo would be pleased to see him over a drink at six o'clock that evening. The hostelry was named and Gavin took his leave. He treated himself later to a large, indigestible tea and lingered over it, and then went off to meet Maarte's son. He felt interested in Bernardo.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Dinner with Bernardo

‘... and your Family I thank God is very well, and I hope a little time will put an end to this troublesom Affaire...’

Samuel Pepys



Bernardo and Gavin met at a pub in the City, but Bernardo soon suggested that they should adjourn.

‘My mamma says you want to talk to me,’ he said, ‘and that it is police business. Why don’t I give you dinner somewhere? Then we can discuss matters.’

‘Very good of you,’ said Gavin. ‘I agree that perhaps our business might be better talked over at table, preferably in a crowded sort of place where everybody is intent on his own business. I have my car.’

‘Good,’ said Bernardo. ‘It is unfashionable, I know, but I don’t drive much in Town.’

No table had been booked, as the invitation had been issued on the spur of the moment, but Bernardo appeared to be *persona grata* with the head waiter and a place was found for them in a crowded grill-room which formed part of the basement of a popular hotel not far from Piccadilly Circus.

Bernardo was a smooth and excellent host and Gavin began to enjoy himself. The case, he was certain by now, was a push-over, but he was canny and careful and did not want to leave any loopholes. Over the hors-d’oeuvres (Bernardo) and his own choice (hare soup) the conversation was polite and general, but when the turbot with Hollandaise sauce had been cleared and a Burgundy substituted for the Barsac, Bernardo got down to business.

‘So the police are after me,’ he said, with his charming smile. ‘Exactly why?’

‘If the police were really after you,’ said Gavin, ‘I should not be accepting your hospitality. One of our old-fashioned but reassuring rules. There are just a few things I would like you to tell me, but that is all. First, what is your attitude

towards your cousin, Florian Colwyn-Welch?’

‘My attitude? I don’t really know. I’m engaged to be married to his sister and I don’t think he likes the idea.’

‘Why is that?’

‘He’s inclined to be a sort of member of the Hitler Youth, I think — i.e. a bit anti-Semitic. Then, too, apart from the fact that it’s obvious he doesn’t want her to marry *me*, I don’t think he wants Binnie to marry at all. Fortunately she takes this attitude mostly as a big joke. She isn’t very intelligent, I’m afraid.’

‘And you don’t find a lack of intelligence a drawback? It doesn’t irritate you, I mean?’

Bernardo hesitated while the waiter poured a little wine into his glass. He sniffed and tasted, as a matter of form, (the wine cellar at the hotel was a noted one), and then replied:

‘There are too many intelligent women in our family. A good-natured fool will be a most pleasant change. Besides, Binnie, apart from possessing fewer brains than our average, is a restful sort of person. She doesn’t make demands on one, she is cheerful and practical and, in contrast to Florian, she’s extroverted to a most refreshing degree. Of course, she’s apt to giggle, but I don’t mind that at all.’

‘Right. Let’s go back to Colwyn-Welch. Do you know why his granduncle quarrelled with him?’

‘Oh, yes. The old man told me. After all, my grandmother, my father and I are all concerned in the marketing of diamonds. There are times when the trade takes precedence even of family affairs. To be in diamonds is to be in love. Everything else is secondary. Well, not to put too fine a point on it, Florian (whose allowance from grandpapa has never been spectacularly generous, and whose prospects suffered an eclipse when I became engaged to Binnie), light-fingered some of the old man’s best diamonds — those he kept in the house — and, like the ass he is, let himself be found out. Well, you might get away with murder where a diamond-merchant is concerned, but not with half-inching his pebbles. There was the father and mother of a row and Florian was cast into outer darkness.’

‘But he has been reinstated, as I understand it. How did that come about?’

‘Well, grandpapa took me into his confidence, so my mamma and I talked turkey to him. My Dutch sense of justice took precedence, for once, over my Jewish instinct for hanging on to a good thing so long as it was honestly come by. Mamma was particularly forthright, and was heavily backed by uncles Derde

and Sweyn. Florian, of course, is popular in the family.'

Gavin looked up from the roast beef and Yorkshire he had chosen.

'With every member of it?' he asked. Bernardo smiled and addressed himself to saddle of mutton and brussels sprouts.

'Well, with every member except, possibly, my aunt Ruby, my papa and myself,' he said. 'Why?'

'Because it seems fairly certain that while he was in exile in Derbyshire, somebody attempted to poison him with a piece of chocolate-cream which, the evidence indicates, was sent to him from Holland.'

'I see,' said Bernardo. He sipped his wine. 'Yes, indeed.'

'You read about the two unfortunate girls who were handed the fatal dose?'

'Yes. Yes, I did.'

The two men ate and drank without speaking during the next few minutes. Gavin was wondering how best to frame another question. He glanced at the Byronic profile and decided upon the direct approach. Bernardo was no hysterical Narcissus, but a well-balanced worldling, older in poise and maturity than his twenty-six years might suggest.

'Well, it's like this,' he said. 'I have details of Mr van Zestien's latest will. It is clear that if young Colwyn-Welch could be liquidated, more than one member of the family would stand to gain a pretty substantial sum.'

Bernardo, forestalling the waiter, topped up the wineglasses.

'Yes,' he admitted. 'Even, let us say, an eighth share of grandpapa's worldly goods would be well worth having. So you think Grand-aunt Binnen or Aunts Opal and Ruby, or, failing them, Uncle Derde and/or Uncle Sweyn, sent poor old Florian a lethal dose, do you?'

'Such things have been known before,' said Gavin. There was a longer pause this time. They cleared their plates.

'Yes,' said Bernardo, leaning back, 'but there's one thing you've left out of your calculations. I'll have pheasant,' he added to the waiter. 'Same for you, Gavin?'

Gavin thanked him, and then said,

'I think I know what you mean. You mean that the position of those members of the family you have mentioned would be exactly the same if you, and not Colwyn-Welch, were liquidated.'

'That's it.'

'Which brings me to my next point. Have you ever had any reason to suppose that an attempt, however misdirected, *has* been made on your life?'

Bernardo inspected his portion of pheasant and pushed aside the game chips with which it was garnished. He poured out more wine.

‘No,’ he said. ‘For one thing, I’ve never thought about it, so, of course, I haven’t suspected anything. But I’m perfectly certain I’ve never been in the slightest danger. Apart from anything else, you see, to do me in would be to deprive poor little Binnie of the chance of becoming wife to a comparatively wealthy man. My parents and my very formidable grandmother are far from poor, and what with my expectations there, and a half-share in grandpapa’s leavings — if you see what I mean—’

‘Yes, I do see. What else do you deduce?’

‘Well,’ said Bernardo, ‘all I can see is that the money may have nothing to do with it. I suppose...’ he hesitated.

‘You’re going to suggest to me that perhaps the deaths of those two girls were not, after all, accidental, aren’t you? You’ve been wondering whether the poisoned chocolate-cream went where it was intended to go. But that would implicate Colwyn-Welch to the hilt. He admits he gave them the sweet-stuff.’

‘I’ve always thought Florian had nine lives,’ said Bernardo, with apparent irrelevance, ‘but I can’t see him doing in barmaids and such, unless he’d got them into trouble. He hadn’t, had he?’

‘Nobody had. The post-mortem settled that.’

‘Odd, in these indiscriminate, lax and experimental times. Well, where has the conversation got us?’ He polished off the last of the pheasant, again pushed the game chips aside and added, ‘Why *will* they serve up these nasty little bits of wooden potato? Does *anybody* bother to eat them?’

‘I don’t think the conversation has got us very far,’ said Gavin. ‘We can’t even be sure, beyond possibility of doubt, that the chocolate-cream wasn’t purchased over here. Plenty of Dutch chocolate is imported. We tried all the local shops about and around the area — a pretty wide area, too — but, of course, it could have been bought in London.’

‘London? I see. That could bring my immediate family into the picture, and, of course, myself.’

‘Or you could have bought the stuff in Amsterdam or Rotterdam and sent it to Colwyn-Welch in Derbyshire. You visit Holland pretty frequently in connection with your job?’

‘I do, yes.’ He looked politely interested and not at all apprehensive.

‘Did you — were you accustomed to visit Mrs Colwyn-Welch and her daughters when you were there?’

‘Oh, I usually looked in on them. They expected it, you know.’

‘Did you ever see a cylinder from a barrel-organ lying about in their apartment?’

‘A cylinder from a barrel-organ?’

‘Yes, one of those things with holes in them (I think) which makes the tunes when the fellow turns the handle, or, in this case (so my wife tells me), the big wheel.’

‘Oh, so that’s what it was!’

‘What what was?’

‘Why, the last time I was there, Aunt Ruby pushed a cardboard box on to me and asked me to throw it into the canal. She said she had broken something belonging to Aunt Opal (of whom, as I’ve always known, she’s scared stiff). She said that, if time elapsed before Aunt O. discovered her loss, it would be all right, but if the sad remains were left lying about waiting to be disposed of by the authorities, there might be the devil to pay. She mentioned a tigress bereft of her cubs, I remember — all this in Dutch, which my mamma has brought me up to speak and to understand, but the speed of Aunt R’s delivery made mostly nonsense of her arguments. Still, I got the main points.’

‘And where is the cylinder now? *Did* you throw it into the canal?’

‘I did not. I shouldn’t think the authorities encourage people to throw their rubbish into the canals. Anyway, I didn’t risk it. I left it under a seat at the airport. It may be there still, for all I know.’

‘And you didn’t know what was in the parcel?’

‘No. Aunt Opal’s household gods wouldn’t interest me. I walked out with the parcel under my arm and nobody asked any questions, so that was that. Why, is the cylinder important?’

‘I don’t know. My wife and Dame Beatrice seemed to think it had some kind of special significance, but I don’t pretend to guess what kind it would be, if any.’

‘Going back a bit—’ said Bernardo — ‘I’ll have cheese and celery, waiter. What for you, Gavin? A sweet or an ice or something?’

‘Angels on horseback, please. Yes, going back a bit?’

‘This suggestion that one of us may have bought the chocolate-cream in London. Well, I admit we could have done, but I don’t think any of us knew that Florian had gone into Derbyshire.’

‘According to my information, Professor Verde or Professor Sweyn van Zestien must have known, and it is possible that Miss Opal Colwyn-Welch knew

it, too — or even Miss Ruby.’

‘Oh, *did* they?’ said Bernardo. He selected a piece of celery with considerable care. ‘*Did* they?’ he repeated. ‘So, if all four of them knew, one of them could have told *me*. Is that it? And now, what shall we drink with our coffee?’

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The She-Bear Defends Her Grand-Cub

‘I think I am pretty well conversant with your present condition. I don’t want you to consider me impertinent but I *do* want you to let me help you if I can.’

Guy Boothby



So there is my Bernie!’ screamed Rebekah. ‘My Bernie that fights for his life against your secret police!’

‘Do come in, Mrs Rose,’ said Laura, who had gone into the hall when Célestine, obviously disapproving, had announced the visitor. ‘I expect you’d like to talk to Dame Beatrice.’ She conducted Rebekah into a large, book-lined room on the first floor of the tall house in Kensington and indicated an armchair. Rebekah ran a hand over it before she sat down.

‘Tottenham Court Road,’ she pronounced, with a sniff, ‘and is not matching in a suite. Job lots, I tell you. You have been cheated.’

‘Well, it’s a comfortable chair, anyway,’ retorted Laura. ‘What shall I say about you to Dame Beatrice? She’s got a patient at the moment, so you’ll have to wait a bit, I’m afraid.’

‘To wait is nothing, if it shall save my Bernie’s life.’

‘Why, what’s Bernardo been up to? BemieHalf a minute, while I get contact.’ She achieved this on the house blower and announced to Dame Beatrice that Mrs Rebekah Rose was among those present. She listened for a moment to Dame Beatrice’s reply and then turned again to Rebekah.

‘Would you excuse me? I have some letters to answer. There are magazines on the side table and sherry and some glasses in that cupboard.’

‘Biscuits?’ enquired Rebekah. As soon as Laura had gone, she prowled about the room, assessing the value of the furnishings in a growling undertone and occasionally clicking her tongue or giving a disparaging flip of the fingers at some intrinsically worthless object. She investigated the contents of the

cupboard, took out the sherry and a couple of glasses, opened a tin of biscuits and selected the plainest she could find. This she munched with a martyred air and was ready for Dame Beatrice when the latter came in with a formal apology for keeping her waiting.

‘You are strained,’ said Rebekah grandly. ‘I shall give you a glass of sherry. You should buy cheaper. This is too good for customers. Me, I give customers at sixteen shillings and sixpence a bottle, retail, less wholesale from Julius Honerweg, distant connection. I do not offer South African sherry, although at a better price. So is my opinion of apartheid.’

She poured out two glasses of sherry and, with a royal gesture, presented one of them to Dame Beatrice, who pledged her with a solemnity that Laura would have admired.

‘And now,’ said Dame Beatrice, setting down her glass, ‘you wanted to see me. As I know that your time is valuable, it is something of importance, I infer.’

‘Of the first importance. It is my Bernie. He loses his life to your secret police.’

‘Dear me! I have heard from Detective Chief-Inspector Gavin, who interviewed him yesterday, and I do not think you have any cause for alarm.’

‘Where are the police is always cause for alarm. Why they are talking to Bernie?’

‘Look, Mrs Rose,’ said Dame Beatrice, seriously, ‘if I tell you something in confidence — in the strictest confidence, mind! —’

‘I can keep secrets. Not long is one in business who cannot keep secrets.’

‘All right, then. A very damaging accusation has been made against Mr Bernardo Rose and it must be investigated in order that his innocence may be proved.’

‘An accusation?’

‘Yes, and, as I say, of a very serious nature. It has been said that he sent a package of poisoned chocolate-cream to his cousin, Mr Florian Colwyn-Welch.’ To her astonishment, Rebekah received this news in silence and took another sip of her sherry. ‘Of course, nobody believes this,’ Dame Beatrice continued, on a cheerful note, ‘but to disprove it may take a little time.’

‘Bernie told his father, my son Sigismund, that the policeman is showing Bernie could have known where Florian was, to send him this poison.’

‘Chocolate-cream seems an unusual sort of present for one young man to send to another. Does Mr Colwyn-Welch *like* chocolate-cream?’

‘Chocolate-cream, heroin, purple hearts, all those poisonous snow, the young

people take them all, and there are no questions,' said Rebekah.

'Mrs Rose, you are not being helpful.'

'How to keep my Bernie from the gallows?'

'Even if he were found guilty — which, I assure you, he cannot be — he would receive life imprisonment, not a hanging. He has robbed nobody.'

'Is Joan of Arc accepting life imprisonment?'

'According to George Bernard Shaw, no,'

'So what is there in it?'

'For you? To go on believing in your grandson's innocence, in the sure faith that it can be proved.'

'It is known,' said Rebekah, doubtfully, 'that there was a fight.'

'What of it? Young men are made that way. Besides, Mr Colwyn-Welch got the worst of it.'

'This wine-glasses,' said Rebekah, fingering her own, 'are not too bad. You have a dozen?'

'Yes, I have.'

'I offer — let me see, now. Is there a decanter?'

'Yes, there is.'

Then I offer ten pounds. There is no sale for cut-glass decanters. And the sideboard. Is fumed oak. You will throw it in?'

'No, I do not think so. It is useful, in its way. But you may have the glasses and the decanter as a gift, if you would like them.'

'A gift? What is it, this gift?' asked Rebekah, suspiciously.

'An expression of goodwill and an assurance that Mr Bernardo Rose will not be hanged, transported or imprisoned.'

'We shall take another glass of my good sherry,' said Rebekah.

'I offered you the glasses and the decanter, but not the sherry,' said Dame Beatrice. Rebekah looked amazed.

'Nothing to put in the glasses?' she demanded.

'At a price, yes.'

'Mean dealing! Not so make my friends.'

'I cannot help that. You must take it or leave it. I can replace the glasses, but I cannot replace the sherry. It was a gift from the Spanish government.'

'You are telling lies!'

'Yes, of course I am,' Dame Beatrice equably agreed. 'But, if you want the glasses and the decanter, you must buy the sherry.'

'And the price?'

‘One hundred and twenty-five pounds.’

Rebekah laughed, her chins wobbling with mirth.

‘Now,’ she said, when she could speak, ‘we are understanding one another.’ She took up the decanter. ‘This is fake. Suppose I give you one hundred twenty-five including cellar full of sherry, and I find you genuine decanter, same year of date, you buy back at five hundred?’

‘Two hundred.’

‘Two hundred fifty.’

‘Done.’

‘And you save my Bernie from your gallows?’

‘Why do you think he is guilty?’

At this, Rebekah looked troubled.

‘I do not think so, but what else is there to think? And Florian *does* like chocolate-cream, so why is he giving it away to unknown girls?’

‘That, indeed, does give food for thought.’

Before there was time to digest this food, Célestine appeared. Bernardo Rose had called. He desired an audience of Dame Beatrice.

‘Mine Bernie!’ shrieked Rebekah. ‘I embrace him all quick!’

‘Show Mr Rose in,’ said Dame Beatrice. Bernardo was shown in. He regarded his grandmother with a disfavour which was off-set by an impudent wink at Dame Beatrice.

‘Hullo, Grandmamma,’ he said. ‘Are you engaged upon queering my pitch, as usual?’

‘I am saving your neck from pieces of rope, no?’

‘Well, I should rather imagine that you’re mulcting my exchequer of pieces of eight, Grandmamma. Anyway, what goes on?’

‘Dame Beatrice is telling you what goes on. She is employed by me to establish your chocolate-cream lark, isn’t it? How is it you are sending chocolate-cream to that creep?’

‘He likes it, Grandmamma.’

‘So?’

‘Don’t you?’

‘This chocolate-cream,’ said Rebekah, turning confidentially to Dame Beatrice, ‘is with me to clog the intestine.’

‘Drink orange juice,’ advised Bernardo.

‘Have some of my good sherry,’ said his relative. Bernardo eyed Dame Beatrice, who waved a yellow hand. He helped himself, but was pursued by the

lamentations of Rebekah.

‘So lavish!’ she moaned. ‘So is the glass so full! I pay one hundred fifty pounds for this sherry, and you drink it like water.’

‘I don’t drink water,’ said Bernardo. ‘Now, then, why did you come here?’

‘To save your neck, you ungrateful!’

‘I still don’t see the point.’

‘You are poisoning Florian, isn’t it?’

‘Willingly — if I could do it without being caught. I don’t like the beautiful boy. He’s a headache.’

‘And to you?’ screamed Rebekah.

‘To me? I knocked his ribs in once, and I can do it again.’

‘So?’

‘So I didn’t murder those silly girls. Why not write that in your memoirs?’

‘You paid too much for that suit!’

‘No, I did not. What will you give me for it?’

‘Twenty-five pounds.’

‘Nothing doing. I like this suit.’

‘You do?’

‘What’s more, what on earth do you think you’re doing here, ruining my reputation with Dame Beatrice?’

‘She is not believing,’ she said, assessing the reactions with accuracy.

‘Of course she isn’t. You’d better let me take you out for a nice ride in my car, with dinner to follow.’

‘Where we are going?’

‘Wherever you like. You say, and that’s where we go.’

‘Marlow?’

‘All right.’

‘No,’ said Rebekah, with decision. ‘I go to where you murdered those pretty girls down in Derbyshire.’

‘O.K., then. Perhaps you’ll tell me where *you* got the poison, because *I* didn’t kill them, you know.’

His relative laughed. It was relaxed, delightful laughter and she surrendered herself to it. Dame Beatrice looked sympathetic.

‘So what is it, this laughing?’ demanded Rebekah, coming to. ‘You...’ she pointed to Dame Beatrice, ‘you are psychiatrist, isn’t it? Why am I laughing at a broken heart?’

‘Dame Beatrice,’ said Bernardo, ‘is a specialist, and a world-famous one, my

love. Specialists expect to be *paid* for their professional services. Don't cadge!'

'And in name of friendship?'

'Neither a borrower nor a lender be, for loan oft loses both itself and friend,' quoted Bernardo.

'And friend you are not!' shouted Rebekah. 'What way should be your friendship, when you don't let me ask one small little simple question about broken hearts?'

'Broken hearts can cost quite big money, my love.'

'Is a breach of promise case you are meaning?'

'You are so right, but you're getting away from the point. I suggest that you stop bothering Dame Beatrice and that we take ourselves off. I'm certain we're wasting her time. Besides, hotels don't keep their dinners on all night.'

'You should get yourself out of here, yes, and before I can say sixty-seven *pesetas*,' said Rebekah.

'Well, can you?' enquired her grandson. 'Thixty-theven pethetath doesn't sound exactly right to me.'

'Oh, you are English public school,' yelled his relative. 'How comes this Florian with all that poison? That is what I ask.'

'The answer isn't a lemon, you know,' said Bernardo, coolly. 'Bend the brain, dear. You know as well as I do where the poison came from. So does Dame Beatrice, I think. The only problem is to find out which of them actually sent it, and also why. I think I know, but I hesitate to commit myself. Rash statements have an awkward way, like those problem chickens one hears mentioned, of coming home to roost.'

'When I am a girl,' said Rebekah, 'we are finding the hens' eggs in a silly hedge.'

'You are not referring to a cuckoo in the nest, by any chance?'

'If there are cuckoos, they are *Derde* and *Sweyn*. What do they make, passing up on their father's money, the way it is?' Her tone changed. She turned to Dame Beatrice. 'You are not letting my Bernie be hanged, you say?' Dame Beatrice reassured her.

'A neck God made for other use than strangling in a string,' quoted Bernardo, to the fury of his grandmother.

'Ingrateful! Here I am saving you from the hanging.'

'*Ungrateful. Ingratitude.* How you can have lived in England all these years and *still* haven't managed to absorb the very rudiments of the language, I shall never understand.'

‘I think,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘that the time has come for us to put our cards on the table.’

‘A show-down, yes,’ said Rebekah, emphatically. ‘Then we all know where we are, and I go to a grand slam.’

‘I doubt it,’ said her grandson, ‘but it may clear the air a bit. Dame Beatrice, will you take first innings?’

‘So she shall give us ideas we do not have,’ objected Rebekah.

‘You may well be right, Mrs Rose,’ agreed Dame Beatrice. ‘Why should we not write down what we believe to be the truth and so compare notes? As I see it, there are four basic questions to be answered. Where did the poison come from in the first place? Who impregnated the chocolate-cream with it? Did Mr Florian Colwyn-Welch know or guess that the chocolate-cream was poisoned? If he did know this, or guess it, why did he give it to Effie the barmaid? Why not have thrown it away?’

‘Yes, I write my answers to all that,’ said Rebekah, ‘but I am not carrying pencils and paper.’

Bernardo took out a fountain pen and a used envelope. His grandmother twitched away the envelope, read the superscription on it and the date on the postmark, sniffed and handed it back. She gestured at his pen.

‘Fountain pen is old-fashioned,’ she sneered. ‘So you are not with it. Should be ball-point.’

‘This pen was a present from the family, darling, and, by the way, Dame Beatrice is trying to hand you a scribbling block and a silver pencil.’

‘Hall-marked?’

‘Hall-marked,’ Dame Beatrice assured her.

‘At trade price, with diamond in the top, I get you a *gold* pencil, if you save my Bernie’s life.’

Dame Beatrice did not commit herself to purchasing a diamond-topped gold pencil, even at trade price. She picked up the house telephone and made contact with Laura, who appeared in the doorway.

‘We are going to do a little writing,’ Dame Beatrice explained. ‘When we have answered the questions, I shall require you to help me to scrutinise the answers.’

‘Well!’ exclaimed Laura, when Rebekah and her grandson had gone. ‘So *that’s* what you were aiming at when you asked all those questions about where the various people spent the war! I suppose Bernardo *is* as innocent as he seems? The old lady was in a bit of a state when she got here.’

‘She has a persecution complex,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘and, of course, the strongest affection for her grandson.’

‘Yes, you were right about that,’ said Laura. ‘Well, now, what about this analysis?’

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Analysis of Three Reactions

‘... for the honour of human nature, we should be glad to find the shocking tale not true.’

James Boswell



Dame Beatrice took up the papers and studied them. She had written her own answers for purposes of comparison with those of Rebekah and Bernardo and she found comparison illuminating. Summarised, to some extent, the papers read:

Question 1

DAME BEATRICE: Likely, but not absolutely certain, that the hydrocyanic acid came from the Colwyn-Welch apartment in Amsterdam, for Binnen *had* been a member of the Dutch Resistance.

BERNARDO: No doubt prussic acid could have been obtained by my great-aunt Binnen, who was an undercover agent of some sort during the war.

REBEKAH: Binnen may have been given means of suicide in case of being captured by (unprintable) pigs of Gestapo. She was helping escapes.

Question 2

DAME BEATRICE: Granted that the chocolate-cream was doctored at, and sent from, Binnen's home, I doubt very much whether she herself had any hand in, or knowledge of, the matter.

BERNARDO: Unless Great-aunt turned the poison in when war ended, Opal or Ruby or both could have got at it. Great-aunt would not use it for murder.

REBEKAH: Binnen is not poisoning the sweets. That will be Opal or Ruby. I think it is Ruby. She is more wicked.

Question 3

DAME BEATRICE: So far as I know at present, there is nothing definitive to show that Mr Colwyn-Welch knew or guessed that the chocolate-cream had been poisoned. (She had underlined the first seven words of this answer).

BERNARDO: I think Florian may have had some suspicion of hanky-panky, but,

of course, I don't know, and would rather not guess.

REBEKAH: Florian is liking all sweets, whatever he now tells people. Phooey he did not guess this poison! He is not giving away good sweets to barmaids without a reason. Who would? He should be trying them on the rats, not on girls, if he suspects doctored sweets.

Question 4

DAME BEATRICE: No answer possible at present.

BERNARDO: I should say it was pretty obvious, but no names, no pack-drill.

REBEKAH: He is guessing Opal. Always very unhealthy her attitude. Such devotion! Phooey! No flies on Florian.

'And, of course,' said Laura, when she also had studied the papers, 'there *aren't* any flies on Florian. She's right enough, at that! So where do we go from here?'

'I shall send these papers, my own included, to our dear Robert, and then I think we shall do well to await his instructions.'

Gavin telephoned that he would like to talk to Dame Beatrice, and asked her to arrange a time. He arrived, looking, as Laura ungracefully expressed it, 'like a well-dressed monkey on a stick.'

'Who does your laundry?' she demanded. Gavin smirked.

'One of the sergeants' wives, I believe,' he replied.

'*One* of the sergeants' wives? How many sergeants do you have? — or how many wives have they got?'

'I don't know, at present. I've only been given me raise this week, you see.'

Laura was speechless. Her husband laughed and addressed himself to Dame Beatrice.

'I enjoyed your dossier, Dame B. How far do you trust the intuition of the Rose family?'

'No farther than I must, of course, but they are an intelligent couple.'

'The lad, of course, is cagey, as lads are apt to be—'

'You cheer a sergeant's laundry-wife. Thank goodness I ain't she!' capped Laura, rather neatly. Gavin blew her a kiss and shot the cuff of an obviously impeccable shirt.

'Passing lightly on,' he said, '*I* should be inclined to think that dear old Rebekah has clouted the nail on the head. What on earth to do about it — since there's nobbut her hunch to go on — I can't conceive.'

'You'd better let Mrs Croc. sort out the Amsterdam household,' said Laura crisply. 'And stop trying to look like Perry Mason!' she added. Gavin grinned.

‘I thought I was more like Doctor Kildare.’ he said, ‘although, of course, younger and better-looking, if you know what I mean. But, to the work in hand. *Would* you brave those fearful females in their noisome den, Dame B.? If so, I’m prepared to stick my neck out with regard to Florian (my God!) Colwyn-Welch, and pull him in on suspicion of having poisoned those two girls. But I can’t do that until I’ve a lot more evidence.’

‘You’ll get it,’ said Laura. ‘I don’t think old Rebekah is right. It isn’t Ruby, it’s Opal, but her reason is a bit far-fetched.’

‘So you know the motive?’

‘Mrs Croc. does, and, knowing Opal’s peculiar mental make-up, I’d say she’s just about right.’

‘Then I’ll leave it to her to sort everything out. How do you feel, Dame B.?’

‘Like the Spartans before Thermopylae,’ Dame Beatrice replied. ‘And, although I lack the sea-wet rocks, I may well find time to sit down and comb my hair, if that is permitted. In other words, time, at present, is not of the essence, as Laura would probably put it.’

She and Laura left for Holland two days later and put up at an hotel in Haarlem, so that they were within easy reach of Binnen and her daughters without actually staying in Amsterdam.

‘About that Thermopylae business,’ said Laura, at breakfast on the first morning of their stay, ‘how, exactly, did you mean?’

‘Thermopylae?’ Dame Beatrice helped herself to the thinly-sliced cheese which, with a platter of cold meat, took the place of the inevitable English bacon and fried egg.

‘Yes, Thermopylae,’ repeated Laura firmly. ‘You know — tell Sparta we lie here obeying her orders, (or something of that sort). Are we proposing to put on an act of Daniel in the lions’ den? Are the Colwyn-Welch mob really dangerous?’

‘Dear me, I hope not!’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I confess, though, to a certain uneasiness. I am determined not to meet them under false pretences, and yet it is a little difficult to see...’

‘How to break the news to them that we think they poisoned that chocolate-cream (loathsome muck!) and sent it to Florian with the express intention of laying him out? Yes, I take your point. Well, what shall we do?’

‘You will make a tour of the town. I am told that the church of St Bavo and the Meat Hall are well worth seeing.’

‘And you?’

‘I shall go to see Mrs Colwyn-Welch.’

‘Don’t you think I’d better come with you?’

‘I would prefer that you did not. If one of us is to be poisoned, I feel that your expectation of life should be considerably greater than my own.’

‘Sez you!’ retorted Laura morosely. ‘Well,’ she added, in a different tone, ‘at what time shall I come and collect you?’

‘I have no idea. You might like to purchase the Franz Hals guide book, if you decide to visit the Oude Mannenhuis, but you may prefer to spend the day at your favourite resort of Zandvoort,’ said Dame Beatrice equably.

‘I could do both, if you think you’ll be all day with the Colwyn-Welch poisoners. Don’t drink their coffee, will you?’

On this note they parted. Dame Beatrice was received with reticence by Binnen and her daughters, an attitude which caused her no surprise, since she had hardly anticipated that she would be welcomed with open arms.

‘You have come about Florian and those two girls,’ said Binnen, without beating about the bush. ‘We know nothing about the circumstances and cannot help you.’

Dame Beatrice was equally forthright.

‘Would you rather deal with me or with the Interpol people?’ she demanded. Binnen looked at her. Opal rose from her chair, a majestic figure.

‘You are not to threaten my mother,’ she said. ‘Why are you here to harass us?’

‘Not, I hope, to harass you, but I *should* like to ask one question,’ Dame Beatrice replied. She addressed herself again to Binnen. ‘I do not know how much you have gathered of what has occurred in England,’ she said, ‘but you probably know that the two girls you mentioned were poisoned by some chocolate-cream.’

‘So?’

‘That is all, unless you would like to tell me whether it is possible that the poison came from this house. I am making no accusation, you understand, but your grandson does appear to be involved.’

‘There is no poison in this house,’ said Binnen.

‘You were a member of the Netherlands Resistance, were you not?’

‘Unlike ourselves, who were interned,’ said the hitherto silent Ruby, with a certain amount of venom.

‘I was helping airmen to escape,’ said Binnen apologetically to her daughter. ‘Was that not a good thing?’

‘Yes,’ said Dame Beatrice, before Ruby could reply. She rose to take her leave.

‘Wait!’ said Ruby, springing to her feet from the sofa on which she had been seated. ‘Florian *did* get the poison from here. It *was* belonging to my mother. We did not know he had taken it. None of us knew.’

‘Be silent, Ruby!’ said Binnen, in dangerously quiet tones. ‘Nothing is to be gained by hysterical behaviour, or by telling such obvious lies. Control yourself, I beg of you. Nothing can be proved against anyone, because nothing exists which is wrong.’

‘Except the deaths of two harmless young women,’ Dame Beatrice pointed out. ‘Their deaths are a fact, and a fact which will need to be explained.’

‘But how should it concern *you*?’ asked Opal. ‘You are not the police.’

‘I am accredited to the Home Office,’ Dame Beatrice replied, ‘and the Home Office takes an interest in murder, you know.’

‘Murder?’ screamed Ruby.

‘You can’t prove anything,’ said Opal, calmly.

‘I may be able to prove that Mr Florian suspected that the chocolate was poisoned,’ retorted Dame Beatrice, looking firmly at her. Ruby, who had subsided again, leapt to her feet once more.

‘I shall kill you,’ she said firmly. Dame Beatrice was unmoved. ‘I shall kill you — now!’ said Ruby. Binnen got up and pushed her daughter back on to the sofa.

‘Do not be so silly to give yourself away. It is not fair or decent,’ she said sternly. Ruby began to cry. ‘So stop!’ said Binnen. She caught Dame Beatrice’s eye. ‘Think well before you take action. My daughters did not have an easy time during the war. Opal, you understand, is obstinate, but Ruby, you will agree, has not recovered from her experiences.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Opal, raising her head, ‘I *am* obstinate, and I do not give civil replies.’

‘I can understand that. Tell me more.’

‘Why should I?’ demanded Opal. ‘I can’t help it if Florian murders people. It’s nothing to do with me.’

‘So go, please,’ said Binnen, getting up. ‘We have had enough. You were right to come, and now you are right (and merciful) to leave.’

‘Seems to have been an odd sort of conversation,’ said Laura, when Dame Beatrice reported it to her that evening. ‘What did you make of it, if anything? Ruby must be mad, of course. That’s evident. Equally evident that Opal is, too.’

‘Is it? Ruby is slightly unhinged, no doubt, but I think that Opal is like Hamlet, in one respect.’

‘I see what you mean. All that north-by-west stuff. I suppose it couldn’t have been much fun for them, being interned, you know.’

‘We don’t know that Opal *was* interned.’

‘*What?*’

‘It seems to me most unlikely.’

‘But why?’

‘Well, to begin with, she seems to know a good deal about Derbyshire.’

‘You mean she spent the war years in England?’

‘Ask yourself, child. The Netherlander have lived too long on the borders of Germany not to know what the Nazis were up to. I don’t know whether they expected their country to be overrun, but I should think children of English parentage were sent out of the country as soon as there seemed any doubt.’

‘Well, where do we go from here? In other words, Binnen is sticking up for her daughters for all she’s worth, I take it — making excuses for their mental state and all that.’

‘Well, what else can she do?’ argued Dame Beatrice reasonably. ‘I have no daughters, but, if I had had them, I would have stood up for them through thick and thin.’

‘To change the subject, that last expression reminds me of the professors,’ said Laura. ‘What does *through thick and thin* really mean?’

‘According to an authority I trust, which is the *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, written by the Reverend E. Cobham Brewer, LL.D., the expression originated with Dryden, and it means *through good report; through soggy mud and stones only thinly covered with dust*. Butler, according to the same authority, records in *Hudibras*, that

*Through perils both of wind and limb
She followed him through thick and thin.*

‘I haven’t read *Hudibras*,’ said Laura, ‘but that doesn’t rhyme.’

‘Again we are at one. I have not read it, either, and I agree that it does not rhyme.’

‘So back we go, and to Derbyshire. To do what, exactly?’

‘I hardly think that to go into Derbyshire would be helpful at the moment. North Norfolk would be my goal.’

‘Do you really think we can get anything else there?’

‘I certainly think we should leave Derbyshire to Robert.’

‘Are you going to tackle old Mr van Zestien again?’

‘No, but I think I might question young Mr Colwyn-Welch again.’

‘About the poisoned chocolate-cream?’

‘Among other things, yes.’

‘What other things?’

‘Barrel-organs, I suppose,’ said Dame Beatrice vaguely.

CHAPTER TWENTY

North Norfolk Again

‘He that shall resolutely excite his faculties... may
set at defiance the morning mist and the evening damp,
the blasts of the east and the clouds of the south.’

Doctor Johnson



Time being no longer of the essence, Dame Beatrice and Laura spent the better part of a week in Holland before returning home. They toured the country between Apeldoorn and Arnhem and visited the national park and game reserve, the Airborne Cemetery at Oosterbeek, (where Dutch children tend the flowers on the graves of the English dead), the Open Air Museum at Arnhem and the Belvedere of Hijmegen.

‘Well,’ said Laura, when they had boarded the boat bound for Harwich, ‘we’ve done ourselves proud. And now — to the work!’

George met them at Harwich with the car and drove them to the tall house in Kensington. There was a pile of correspondence about Dame Beatrice’s London clinic for Laura to tackle, and a formidable list of appointments for Dame Beatrice herself, so that, for the next day or two, both were kept extremely busy.

There was no word from Gavin, so they assumed that no further progress had been made at the Derbyshire end. Laura took down Dame Beatrice’s brief notes on the latest visit to Amsterdam and expanded them into a letter. At her employer’s request, she added a postscript to the effect that they proposed to visit Leyden Hall again with the object, chiefly, of bullying Binnie and of interviewing Florian. A brief acknowledgment of the letter was the only reply.

‘Poor Gavin!’ said Laura, handing his scrappy little typescript to Dame Beatrice. ‘I bet he’s sweating himself footsore and still got nothing to show for it. He’ll be hopping mad, I expect. He does loathe failure and it’s a great pity if ever he *does* fail — and, of course, it has to happen sometimes — because he’s so very thorough and he does work so terribly hard. I only hope he’s having his proper meals.’

‘Well, we seem to have cleared up most things here,’ said Dame Beatrice, amused and somewhat touched by this unusual evidence of wifely concern, ‘and now that dear Robert knows what we intend, we may as well get to work before the more unpleasant of the autumn weather sets in. It can be extremely cold near the North Norfolk coast. I noted that in your letter you spoke of “bullying” Binnie. Is that the best line to take with her, I wonder? It works wonderfully well with some people, but leads to stubbornness in others.’

‘I wonder how cagey that wee bird is?’ said Laura.

‘How strangely, and yet, (one can’t help feeling), how aptly you choose your words, child. Ah, well, get George to have the car ready by nine tomorrow morning. We will lunch in Norwich and descend on the household at the witching hour of three in the afternoon.’

‘You won’t let them know we’re coming?’

‘This time I think not. Avenging angels do not need to advertise their function in advance.’

‘“The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,” in fact?’

‘Perhaps, but I hope to be more successful than were the troops of — I don’t think it was Midian, was it?’

‘I’m not versed in the classics,’ said Laura, with a derisive grin. ‘Oh, well, here’s to the maiden of bashful fifteen — not that they are nowadays — in other words, *let’s* go and bully Binnie.’

Laura had always liked East Anglia for its wide expanse of sky, its rare and brilliant light, its infinite variety of scenery, the enormous length of its coastline, its agriculture (with the exception of the fields of sugar-beet — quite the ugliest crop known to man, in Laura’s opinion) and the extraordinary number and splendour of its churches.

She loved the Broads, the slow Suffolk rivers, the windmills, (what remained of them), the Essex creeks, the Roman forts, the city of Norwich with its Cathedral and its castle, the wild birds and beasts, and, in contrast, the unashamed Bank Holiday atmosphere of Great Yarmouth.

Dame Beatrice knew all this, and as, in any case, they were obliged to spend a night in Norfolk, she decided to extend their stay to two nights, and told Laura to book rooms at the hotel on the salt-marshes where she had once given tea to Opal, Ruby and Petra.

Laura took binoculars with her, intent upon bird-watching. In the early morning she was out on the quay when a pleasant-faced youth in a dinghy called out to her:

‘Want to go as far as the Point? Tide’s just right and there’s quite a decent breeze. Do you sail?’

Laura did sail. She removed heavy shoes and her socks, turned up the ends of her trousers and stepped aboard. The tide was just on the ebb and there was a good depth of water in the narrow creek.

The Point proved to be a steep bank of shingle facing the open sea, but it was possible to beach the boat on a small spit of sand which the ebb tide was uncovering. They got out and pulled the dinghy well up. They sat on the shingle and the boy produced chocolate.

‘You seem to know this place well,’ Laura remarked.

‘I ought to,’ the lad replied. ‘I’ve lived here all my life. My father’s the rector.’

‘We’re only here for a couple of days.’

‘On a visit?’

‘Well, in a way,’ said Laura, who hated lying. ‘We’ve got to see some people who live at a place called Leyden Hall.’

‘Friends of yours?’

‘No, not really. I met the girl in Holland this summer.’

‘Oh, Binnie! Nice girl, but over-enthusiastic for my liking. Nothing wrong with that, I suppose, but she does gush a bit, doesn’t she?’

‘Brother, you said a mouthful,’ said Laura, grinning. ‘She’s engaged to be married, I hear.’

‘Yes. I shall have to dig into my jeans for a wedding present. One thing, nowadays one can always give a record, which solves the problem nicely. I play tennis sometimes in the summer with her and her brother and my sister. Oh, look! There’s a skua chasing a tern! Quick, or you’ll miss them!’

Laura focused her binoculars.

‘Fine!’ she said.

‘Did you get them all right?’

‘Yes, thanks. You must be old Hawk-Eye in person.’

‘Well, living here, I suppose I’ve had an advantage. There’s a bird-sanctuary, you see, and my father has always been keen, and has been teaching me ever since I was a small kid.’

‘Does he play tennis too?’ asked Laura, anxious to get the conversation back on to the rails.

‘Oh, yes. He’s quite good. Binnie, of whom we spoke just now — Binnie Colwyn-Welch, you know — oh, yes, of course, you *do* know her — drives over

to our church sometimes and my father likes to find out who's who in the congregation. He thinks it makes people feel more at home, I suppose. Personally, I think most people, unless they're particularly involved in church affairs, prefer to remain anonymous. However, Binnie, being the bright thing she is, liked letting her hair down and getting to know us, so that's how the tennis came about. They've a couple of very decent courts, one grass, one hard, at that place of theirs. Have you ever played on them?'

'No,' said Laura. 'We're not on those sort of terms — at least, not at present. You say you met her brother?'

'Friend of yours?'

'Goodness, no!'

'Oh, then I can say what I think; and what I think is that Brother Florian is a wart. He cheats in the scoring, too — always saying a ball is out when it isn't, and calling forty-fifteen in his own favour instead of an obvious thirty all. And he tries to get people to lend him money, I was told. But I can't swear to that, because he's never tried me for a touch. Knows I haven't got any money, I suppose. He can find out that sort of thing, I think.'

'Yes, I expect he can,' said Laura. 'Did you meet Mr van Zestien?'

'Yes, Binnie invited my sister and me to tea one afternoon after tennis. Nice old chap I thought him — very starchy, in a way, but nice. It's a fabulous place they've got there, isn't it? Not Buckling or Holkham, of course, but very impressive, all the same.'

Laura looked at her watch.

'I'm ready for breakfast,' she said.

'Yes,' the boy agreed. 'Tell you what I usually do. I leave the boat here — it's an awful business beating up against an ebb tide because you can't do much about tacking in the creek, it's so narrow. Then I walk back across the marshes — you have to paddle here and there because there are streams, but it's all perfectly safe — and come back the same way when the tide's on the make again and I can pick up the boat and come up the creek.'

'Did you enjoy your bird-watching?' Dame Beatrice enquired, over a rather late breakfast. Laura described her outing and added that an independent witness had confirmed her own impressions of Florian, Binnie and old Mr van Zestien. Dame Beatrice listened attentively and nodded solemnly several times.

'It was while strolling along the causeway over these marshes that I had my interesting and illuminating talk with Miss Opal Colwyn-Welch, of course,' she said. They inspected the church and explored what there was of the village, had

coffee at eleven on the first-floor balcony of the hotel, lunched at half-past one and then had the car brought round to be driven to Leyden Hall.

Old Bernard van Zestien was taking his afternoon nap when they arrived. The servant who opened the door recognised Dame Beatrice as one of the people who had visited the house before and made no difficulty about showing them into the library.

There was no difficulty, either, in estimating the warmth of Binnie's welcome. She was delighted to see them. She gushed, (to Laura's irritation) but, to Dame Beatrice's more experienced and less prejudiced view, with genuine relief when they were shown in.

'Oh, gosh!' she exclaimed. 'Never were callers more welcome! You'll stay the night, of course! We're got lots of spare bedrooms. What about tea? Or you could have some sherry or something. Just say what you'd like. Of course, ever since I met darling Laura in Holland, I've adored every minute I've been with her, so you really *must* stay a good long time. Granduncle will *adore* to have you!'

'I am not at all sure...' Dame Beatrice began. Binnie burst in, as Dame Beatrice had known she would.

'Oh, but *I* am!' she exclaimed. 'I am quite sure he will, and I know *I'm* thankful to see you! I don't know what to make of Florian, or, (for the matter of that), grand-uncle. They both know something I don't know, and, between them, they're worrying me silly.'

'What sort of thing?' Dame Beatrice enquired.

'Florian killed those two women,' said Binnie, in restrained and reasonable tones. 'I know he did, although he hasn't exactly told me so. I don't suppose he meant to, but, even if he did, I'm not going to give evidence against him.'

'Of course not. Nobody would expect it. For one thing, you do not know anything definite about what happened, and therefore your evidence would be valueless.'

'Aunt Ruby put that lump of polish on the stairs, you know,' said Binnie, changing the subject with some suddenness.

'Yes, that was fairly obvious,' Dame Beatrice agreed. 'However, nothing much came of it, except a nasty bump on your brother's head.'

'She wanted to get rid of him before Aunt Opal could have the bust made and the hand painted! They're supposed to be fond of one another, but they're *not*!'

'We understand that. These situations are not uncommon between thwarted

sisters. Tell us more about the fact that your grandmother, Mrs Colwyn-Welch, agreed to pay for the portrait-bust and the painting of the hand holding the hyacinth.'

'It's easy enough,' said Binnie. 'She's got a guilty conscience about those aunts of mine. You see, old Grandpa Colwyn-Welch left a fair amount of money, (so I'm told), and it was all left to her, but in trust, or something, for the aunts. Well, she's just simply kept her hooks on it, and that means she's kept Opal and Ruby in her power. Of course, you can't blame her, in a way. She doesn't want to lose them, so the only thing is to keep them so short of cash that they can't leave home. If they'd been a bit younger they might have got jobs, but, from what I know of them, Opal would have been too lazy and Ruby too feeble to hold a job down, and Binnie knew that. All the same, what between her guilty conscience and her fear of Opal...'

'Her fear of Opal?' asked Dame Beatrice, as the narrator paused.

'Well, wouldn't *you* be scared of Opal? *I* am,' said Binnie earnestly.

'What about the barrel-organ?' asked Dame Beatrice, who had her own methods of changing — or appearing to change — the subject.

'Oh, Aunt Ruby knew enough about you to realise that she'd better buy and destroy that cylinder which included *The Flowers of the Forest*. She and Aunt Opal are very queer characters, you know. I think there was some idea about Florian's being one of the flowers of the forest, or something. Oh, I *shall* be glad when I'm married to Bernie! He's so safe and so sensible. Yes, and I don't believe what some of them say about him!'

'What do they say?' Dame Beatrice gently enquired.

'That he sent Florian the poisoned chocolate-cream. I know he didn't!'

'So do I. We have guessed where that came from.'

'You mean Aunt Opal or Aunt Ruby. But how are you going to prove it?'

'I doubt whether it is capable of proof,' admitted Dame Beatrice, in the same gentle tone.

'Then what about Bernie?'

'He has a formidable grandmother on his side.'

Binnie giggled.

'She *is* awful, isn't she?' she said. Dame Beatrice did not dispute this verdict, although she disagreed with it.

'I wonder whether I could have a word with your brother?' she asked.

'He's a bit under the weather these days,' said Binnie, 'but I expect he'll see you if you want him to. I'll go and rake him out.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Pursuit of a Delft Blue

‘I winna spare for his tender age,
Nor yet for his hie hie kin;
But soon as e’er he born is,
He sall mount the gallows pin.’

Old Ballad



Florian was perfectly willing to talk to Dame Beatrice.
(‘Thinks he got the better of my cautions but not foolish husband,’
said Laura later).

Florian, his wolfish smile even more pronounced than before, received Dame Beatrice graciously.

‘Oh, hullo again,’ he said. ‘Very nice of you to come.’

‘I am not so sure about that,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘What made you say that Bernardo Rose sent you the poisoned chocolate-cream?’

Florian’s smile faded. He stared at her.

‘Why, who else could have sent it?’ he demanded. ‘It *must* have been Bernie. He’s the only person who dislikes me.’

Dame Beatrice did not dispute this. She asked:

‘What made you guess it was poisoned?’

‘Guess it was poisoned? But I didn’t! Of course I didn’t!’

‘Why did you present it to the barmaid?’

‘An act of kindness and goodwill, that’s all.’

‘It must have been, since you yourself are said to be fond of all kinds of sweetmeats.’

‘I’m fond of girls, too. I thought Effie would like the stuff, and that’s the reason I gave it to her.’

‘Yet you suspected that it contained poison.’

‘No, no! You’ve got it all wrong. I didn’t suspect it contained poison. I would never have thought of such a thing. But when the girls died and the

chocolate-cream was suspected, I guessed Bernie had sent it.'

'Why should he want to kill you?'

'I don't know, except — well, there might be two reasons, I suppose. He knows I'm opposed to the marriage and then — well, there *is* the question of the van Zestien money. Being a Jew, he's very fond of money.'

'Aren't we all? — and Mr Rose is half Jewish and half Dutch, I believe. Incidentally, since you say you suspect him, have you any theory as to where he procured the poison?'

Florian stared at her again, then shook his head.

'No idea,' he said decisively. 'I dare say he's in with all sorts of shady people, both here and abroad, who could get him anything he wanted, and no questions asked. All those trips to the Continent are not only in connection with the diamond business, I'll bet. I wouldn't put it past him to smuggle dope.'

'That is a very serious charge!'

'Oh, it's not a charge. I couldn't care less about what he gets up to on those trips of his. But I don't want Binnie mixing herself up with him. I can't stand the fellow! I think he's a cad and a rotter, and if I can do anything to spike his guns I'm going to do it.'

'Dear me! You certainly do dislike him. The more serious charge, of course, which you have brought against him is that he poisoned the chocolate-cream.'

'I wish I could have him arrested! Those poor girls!'

'Yes, those poor girls,' Dame Beatrice sadly agreed.

'The police *ought* to arrest him!' said Florian, on a note almost of hysteria. 'I should have thought they'd got enough to go on.'

'Not nearly enough, I'm afraid. The police have to be very careful in these cases of suspected attempts to murder. You, for instance, may possibly think yourself fortunate, (as the chocolate-cream seems to have been your gift to Effie), not to be charged yourself, you know.'

'Me? Charged with murder? Oh, but I couldn't be! I had nothing whatever against the girl!' He looked extremely alarmed, Dame Beatrice noted.

'Motive does not need to be proved,' she said coolly. 'You could be shown to have had both the means and the opportunity, and those are the deciding factors when it comes to a trial for murder.'

'Yes, but I'd nothing *against* the girl!' Florian repeated. 'That would weigh with a jury, wouldn't it?'

'Oh, I expect it would,' Dame Beatrice off-handedly replied. But she had frightened him badly. That was evident. On the other hand, she had warned him,

too. That also had been her intention.

‘Oh, well, fair’s fair,’ commented Laura, when Dame Beatrice described the interview. ‘So you think that darling Florian wasn’t just “trying it on the dog”, so to speak. You think he really intended to kill that girl. That means three things, as I see it. He knew the stuff was poisonous; he knew perfectly well where it came from; he did his best to incriminate Bernardo. Where do we go from here?’

‘We go to Derbyshire, preferably with Robert’s permission and in his company, and institute further enquiries.’

‘It would have been a big help if the barmaid had been found to be pregnant, wouldn’t it?’

‘Barmaids are, in one respect, like Caesar’s wife, child. No, we must look elsewhere for a motive, for motives, although not necessary from a legal point of view, are most acceptable as a guide to the enquiring minds of the police and other interested parties.’

‘In other words — ourselves. I’ll get Gavin on the telephone, shall I?’

She did this, and gave him a guarded account of Dame Beatrice’s suspicions and surmises.

‘We’ve been thinking along the same lines ourselves,’ said her husband, ‘but it’s going to be very difficult to prove it. Meet you tomorrow in Buxton. Dinner at the *Spa Flora* at seven.’

‘Well, now,’ he said to Dame Beatrice, when he had met them in the hotel cocktail bar and had ordered, ‘where do we get the evidence we want? I think we’ve explored all Laura’s famous avenues and I’m afraid we’ve got nowhere. We know the chocolate-cream came from young Colwyn-Welch, and, although we presume he either knew or guessed that it was poisoned, we can’t be certain about that.’

‘What we want is evidence that he wanted to do in the barmaid,’ said Laura. Her husband smiled at her.

‘*You* find it, lovey,’ he said.

‘All right, I will,’ said Laura recklessly. ‘And I bet you ten pounds,’ she added, in response to her husband’s intolerable grin, ‘that I do find it, too.’

In bed at the hotel that night, Gavin asked her whether she wanted to cancel the bet.

‘Because you’ve bitten off more than you can chew, you know,’ he added. ‘And, if you do cancel it, not a cheep or a jibe or a sly allusion out of me, I promise you, Laura. You see, we’ve had our suspicions all along that Florian ain’t the innocent lad he makes out to be, and, honestly, we’ve combed out every

nook and corner. I don't see what else remains to be done, I don't, really.'

'I won't cancel the bet,' said Laura sleepily. 'Like darling Yvonne Arnaud, in *Tons of Money*, I've got an idea.'

'Are you old enough to have seen *Tons of Money*? I shouldn't have thought so.'

'Mrs Croc. is. Move over a bit. I'm hanging half out of bed.'

'Well,' said Gavin at breakfast on the following morning, 'what was the big idea you had last night?'

'Big idea?' said Laura, squinting down her nose. 'What big idea?'

'So you *are* up to mischief!'

'Not that I know of. Oh, that! Well, I wondered whether it might not be as well to trot over to Amsterdam and bounce the truth out of Aunt Opal.'

'Good heavens, wench! We can't do that kind of thing! It might create an international situation!' said Gavin, greatly amused. Laura buttered a piece of toast.

'Marmalade, please,' she said. 'I can see that *you* couldn't do it, but Mrs Croc. and I could. Anyway, I vote we try it.'

'If you think you can bounce the truth out of Aunt Opal, you can say that again,' said Gavin. 'I don't know her, but a maiden lady of Anglo-Dutch parentage is going to be a pretty hard nut to crack. No, my lassie, you leave that one alone. It wouldn't work and might be dangerous.'

'As how?'

'Well, we conclude that the prussic acid came from there. They may have some more of it hidden up the chimney, you know.' He helped himself to a soft roll and more butter and marmalade, and added, 'Look, let's see what we can do in this neighbourhood before we go on wild goose chases in Holland. You try that garage where Colwyn-Welch was employed, Laura. We got nothing there that was any good to us, but you might be luckier. Look over their used cars and re-treaded tyres, and pass the time of day in a genial and hearty manner. You might work wonders.'

Laura glowered at him, but, on the advice of Dame Beatrice, (expressed in private after breakfast), she allowed herself to be taken in Dame Beatrice's car to the garage.

Laura had her own very definite way of going about things. No, the car did not need servicing, she said, unless they still engaged a young man named Colwyn-Welch. The proprietor responded that the young man in question had left, and was not all that much good, anyway. He understood cars, but was averse

to doing much of the dirty work on them. And dirty work was eighty per cent of what was needed, the proprietor added. He eyed Laura suspiciously. He thought he had seen her before, he stated. Laura blithely agreed.

‘He’s wanted,’ she said dramatically.

‘Wanted? By the police?’

‘I’m a stool-pigeon, or whatever they call it,’ pronounced Laura. ‘In other words, my husband is a police officer of the C.I.D. and I’ve been sent here to make enquiries.’

‘In that case, madam,’ said the proprietor, ‘I have no information to offer you. You don’t seem *bona fides*, as they say.’

‘So there *is* something fishy,’ said Laura, pleasantly. ‘Oh, well, thank you for your help.’

‘Look, don’t get me wrong. What proof have I got that you’re what you say?’ the proprietor pleaded.

‘You have nothing but my word for what I say, and that isn’t proof. What’s your headache, exactly?’ asked Laura.

‘I don’t know,’ the proprietor admitted, scratching his ear. ‘What do you want me to tell you?’

Laura’s West Highland sixth sense suddenly functioned.

‘Did any letters come for him here?’

‘Letters? What, for Colwyn? — the Welch is a new one on me. Letters for Colwyn, you say?’

‘Yes. There might have been one from Holland.’

The proprietor scratched his ear again. Laura looked at it. An early-autumn chilblain, she surmised. There was certainly a draught in the garage. The ear looked very red and had a badly swollen lobe.

‘Holland? I couldn’t say. He did have one letter addressed here, so far as I remember. He didn’t take much note of it, so far as I’m aware.’

‘What’s the matter with your ear?’

‘That? Nothing. Itches a bit, that’s all.’

‘What does your doctor say about it?’

‘Haven’t got a doctor. Don’t believe in ’em.’

‘But you must be registered under the National Health Scheme.’

‘Oh, I’ve *got* a doctor, but I don’t trouble him.’

‘That’s a pity. He might be able to do something for that ear. I wonder whether I could put you on to somebody?’

‘Not on your life! I don’t hold with doctors. They can’t do nothing for you.’

‘I’m not so sure, but just as you like, of course.’

‘Doctors can’t do nothing for you,’ the man repeated obstinately. ‘He took a girl to look at Eldon Hole,’ he added, ‘and not up to no good, he wasn’t, if you ask me. He cleared out, and that’s all as I can tell you.’

Laura left the garage and rejoined George.

‘Off to Eldon Hole,’ she said briefly. ‘I want to have a look round.’

George, who had been in Dame Beatrice’s service for many years, responded gravely,

‘A very dangerous spot, I am informed, madam.’

‘Of course it isn’t dangerous,’ said Laura. ‘Anyway, I want to go and see it.’

George drove off, and pulled up as near the natural chasm as he could.

Without a word, having locked the car, he followed Laura at a discreet distance. She went up to the fence which guarded the hole, and looked over, into the cleft. George moved a little nearer. He gave a discreet cough. Laura turned.

‘If I may say so, Mrs Gavin, madam,’ he said, ‘you would jeopardise my job if you decided to climb over.’

‘George,’ said Laura, ‘supposing, in summer, you wanted to dispose of a compromising sort of letter, wouldn’t you chuck it down there?’

‘Young fellows on holiday climb down such places for a dare, or just for the hell of it, madam. It would not be a very safe place to deposit anything really dangerous — not if you were known in the neighbourhood, that is. A far more likely thing would be to throw it on the fire.’

‘But this would have been at the end of the summer. There wouldn’t be any fires.’

‘Not in a farmhouse?’ suggested George.

‘Good heavens! They *did* visit a farmhouse! What’s more, I know which one. They had tea there, too. To the car, George! There may be red-hot news for Dame Beatrice when we get back.’

The farmer’s wife remembered her and asked after her husband. Gavin (as usual, thought Laura, who, secretly, was proud of this quality in him) had made an impression which did not easily vanish from people’s minds. She made a suitable and acceptable reply, and then posed the question she was longing to ask.

‘That young friend of ours,’ she said, ‘about whom we enquired last time, if you remember. He seems to have thrown away a rather important letter. I suppose it didn’t, by any chance, get dropped into your kitchen fire?’

‘It wouldn’t be a valuable stamp, would it? the woman asked, rather

anxiously. 'Because I'm afraid I give the stamp to my Ernie. He's stuck it in his album.'

'Well, it was the letter, more than the actual stamp,' said Laura, 'But if I saw the stamp, or knew where it came from, I'd know whether it was on the right envelope.'

'It didn't seem a business letter,' said the woman. 'The young gentleman pulled it out of his pocket with some money he offered me to pay for their tea and says "Drat it! My pockets seem full of rubbish," he says. "Mustn't shed litter," he says, laughing — looked just like a wolf when he laughed. Something to do with his mother when she was carrying him, I suppose — hare lip and all that — but it quite spoilt his good looks. "Mustn't shed litter," he says, "not on this lovely countryside," he says, "so what the hell can I do with it?"

"Our Ernie wouldn't half like the stamp on that there letter, sir," I says. So he tosses me the envelope and his other rubbish and I says I'll put the lot on the kitchen fire for him, so long as he don't mind our Ernie having the stamp.

"I'll come along and see fair play," he says. But the girl gives his arm a tug and tells him they must be off.

"If I says I'll put your litter on the fire, sir, on the fire it will go," I says.'

'And it did?' Laura enquired. 'That's a bit of a nuisance, because it was an important letter and got burnt by mistake.'

'Important?' said the woman, looking surprised. 'I read it over, of course, when they'd gone, and all it said was something about, "Well, if this is what you want, here it is, and best of luck to your efforts."'

'Was it signed?' Laura enquired.

'That's the funny part,' the farmer's wife replied. 'It wasn't exactly signed, but — well, I'll show you, because I kept it, it being unusual and pretty, don't you see? Something out of a Christmas cracker, I thought, and, seeing he was such a handsome young fellow, I made sure it was a romance as had gone wrong, and that was why he wanted to get rid of the letter.'

'Well, I don't think that was the reason,' said Laura, 'but you said you would show me how it was signed, and I should be ever so pleased if I could see the stamp as well.'

The signature (which, as the farmer's wife had stated, was not a signature in the ordinary sense of the word) consisted of a small red stone stuck on to a very small piece of plain paper which had been torn off the end of the letter. The stamp came from Holland and had been postmarked at Amsterdam.

'Not very clever of Ruby,' said Laura, reporting to Dame Beatrice and Gavin,

‘but I suppose it isn’t evidence.’

‘It’s evidence of one thing,’ said Gavin. ‘He’s a murderer all right. He *asked* Aunt Ruby for the poisoned chocolate stuff and she sent it to him.’

‘Unless Opal forged Ruby’s signature, so to speak,’ said

Laura. ‘And, of course, he need not have been a would-be murderer, but only a would-be suicide.’

‘I would be inclined to accept that hypothesis,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘had I not been a witness to his ridiculous performance in the lake at Leyden Hall. That was done to excite our pity and terror, but, owing to Binnie’s commonsense view of the situation, it failed to do either. Besides, I do not think Florian has the temperament for suicide. What we have to find out is what Miss Ruby Colwyn-Welch has to say about the letter, and what reason, if any, Florian had for desiring to accomplish the death of the barmaid.’

‘I don’t see *what* the motive there could have been,’ said Laura.

‘I know. And that brings me to my new theory,’ said Dame Beatrice.

Gavin gave her a quick glance.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘The girl he took to Eldon Hole. We ought to have thought of it before.’

Laura glanced from one to the other. Then she caught on.

‘Good Lord!’ she said. ‘You mean it *wasn’t* Florian who gave the chocolate-cream to the barmaid. It was to this other girl he gave it — the girl he was going out with? She didn’t want it, and she passed it on? But, if that’s so, why did Florian confess he’d given it to Effie?’

‘For the very simple reason,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘that, while he had no reason whatsoever for wishing poor Effie — still less the friend with whom she shared the chocolate-cream — out of the way, he had the best of reasons for wishing to get rid of the girl he escorted to Eldon Hole. The garage proprietor hinted of that to you, didn’t he?’

‘We must find that girl,’ said Gavin. ‘That had better be my job. And I must tackle the landlady at the pub again. She may not have known she was giving false evidence, but what she told me seems to have led us a long way up the garden path.’

‘Then my part will be to interview the household in Amsterdam again,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘They won’t *half* be pleased to see you!’ said Laura, with relish. ‘They practically threw you out the last time you were there.’

‘I wouldn’t tackle the Amsterdam end just yet,’ said Gavin. ‘I want to get the

goods more firmly on Florian first. Once we can really establish his guilt, we shall have a pretty heavy weapon with which to bludgeon his aunts into telling the truth. Now — this girl. We did hear her name once. I thought of the sunshine. Yes, I've got it! Gertie Summers.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Death of a Delft Blue

‘And she’s minded her on a little pen-knife
That hang’d below her gare,
And she has gi’en Young Hunting
A deep wound and a sair.
‘The deepest pot in Clyde Water
They got Young Hunting in,
With a green turf tied across his breast
To keep that good lord down.’

Old Ballad



At Gavin’s request, Dame Beatrice had caused Laura (who, from long practice, was almost the only person who could decipher her calligraphy) to transcribe the notes she had made from time to time on Florian and his affairs and let Gavin have a copy. He wrote to Dame Beatrice from Derbyshire:

‘The landlady refuses to confirm that F. gave the chocolate-cream to the barmaid. Says she herself was suffering from a heavy cold at the time, had understood that the sweet had come from Florian, but had not been in the bar when the stuff was handed over. Put it to her that the barmaid might have received it *via* Gertie Summers and she agreed that this was most likely. As you can see, this is not conclusive. Some people will fall in with any prompting if the suggested idea seems at all possible. Still, for what it’s worth, I’m certainly going to have a word with Gertie Summers. I don’t know why we didn’t think of her before.’

Gertie herself opened the door to him. She was an insipid-looking, hazel-eyed girl who became extremely alarmed when the visitor presented his credentials.

‘It wasn’t my fault! I’d no idea!’ she declared. ‘I just don’t like chocolate-cream.’

‘Perhaps I might come in?’ suggested Gavin. ‘You wouldn’t prefer to come

to the police station, would you?’

‘I’ve never been to a police station in my life. Yes, come in, then. But I do declare to you...’

‘There’s no need. I believe you,’ said Gavin soothingly. He followed her into a small sitting-room which smelt of mothballs. A voice from the kitchen called out:

‘Who is it, Gert?’

‘A policeman, ma!’

‘Half a mo, then, while I change me apron.’

‘I don’t want you, ma. He believes what I says.’

‘So would anybody with any sense, but you hang on before you tells him anything. I’ll be with you in a couple of ticks.’

She was as good as her word, and joined them — a small, resolute woman with hair going grey and a mole on the left cheek. She had the air of one going into battle.

‘I have only one question to put to your daughter, madam,’ said Gavin, getting his shot in first.

‘And that is?’

‘From whom did she receive the chocolate-cream which she tendered as a gift to Miss Effie Harlow?’

‘From *him*, of course, the dirty little (expurgated) hound!’ replied Gertie’s mother, with the venom that these words suggested. ‘Got our Gert here into trouble, which, lucky enough, her new boy’s willing to marry her quick and the vicar not to be told because I’ve set my heart on a white wedding, and such early days yet as the little ’un can be passed off as premature...’

‘Thank you, madam. That’s all I wanted to know. You need fear no more visits from the police. We now have all the evidence we need.’

‘What for, then?’

‘To charge Mr Colwyn-Welch with the attempted murder of your daughter and with the deaths of Miss...’

‘Oh, yes, Effie and that there other gal, poor souls. But when I think it was meant for my Gert — and all because he didn’t have no honourable intentions Gavin extricated himself and went back to the Superintendent.

‘My only fear,’ he said, ‘is that Gertie may tip him off and he’ll slip through our fingers.’

He telegraphed Dame Beatrice:

‘Enough on Florian may bolt.’

‘So now for North Norfolk!’ said Laura.

‘No, no. We go to Amsterdam,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Our dear Robert can take care of affairs in England. If Florian has been warned by the girl he seduced — how extremely odd girls are, by the way! — he will make for Holland and throw himself on the mercy of his relatives there.’

‘His sisters and his cousins and his aunts!’ said Laura, irreverently. ‘When do we go? I can’t wait to trip up the little twister.’

‘We shall be spared that “awarded free kick”,’ said Dame Beatrice, whom television, late in her life, had contrived to educate. ‘Aunt Opal, I fancy, will clinch the matter in her own way.’

They arrived in Amsterdam to find that tragedy (‘so-called,’ commented Laura) had preceded them. The betrayed Gertie had found some means of communicating with Florian, and he had indeed fled to his relatives. Binnen received Dame Beatrice with hauteur and entirely ignored Laura. She agreed that Florian had come to them, having flown from London. She added that he was not in the apartment at the moment, having taken his aunts out for the day.

‘Why do you seek him?’ Binnen asked.

‘In connection with a certain Miss Gertrude Summers,’ Dame Beatrice answered. Binnen shrugged.

‘These girls!’ she said contemptuously.

‘He tried to murder this particular girl,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘A police matter?’

‘I am afraid so.’

‘They were to go to Valkenburg. It was Opal’s wish. She did not want Ruby to go with them, so she will manage to give Ruby the slip.’

‘I suppose it *was* Ruby who sent the poisoned chocolate-cream.’

‘Yes, it was Ruby, I am sure. I think he told her that he had gone wrong with a girl in England and wished for suicide.’

‘Why did she send him the means for it?’

‘She hates him. She tried to kill him by the polish on the stairs in England. She is a fool. Her father, all over again. Weak and silly. So when he wishes for suicide, she is pleased, and, like the idiot she is, believes him.’

‘You let her have the poison, then?’

‘She knew where it was.’

‘Why does she hate him?’

‘Because Opal loves him.’

To Dame Beatrice’s mind this made sense. She said briskly:

‘Well, we’ve been deputed to find him, so we’ll go to Valkenburg.’

‘*Tot ziens!*’ said Binnen, brightening up, this greatly to Laura’s surprise.

‘Doesn’t she like Florian, then?’ she asked, when they were in a hired car *en route* for the grotto.

‘Who could, except in the name of Lady Charity?’ responded Dame Beatrice. But they were too late at Valkenburg, (according to Laura), and just late enough, (in Dame Beatrice’s opinion), for Florian was dead. His body had been found lying face downwards in the underground lake in the depths of the Valkenburg grotto. He had been stabbed very cleanly through the heart. The knife was lying in the water near the body.

The Dutch police prudently elected to present it as a case of suicide. Opal, who had reported, at the exit to the grotto, that her nephew was missing, affected to be (and probably was) heartbroken, and, Dame Beatrice learned later from Binnie, who came to London to see her, was spending all day and every day in gazing upon the gold-painted plaster bust.

‘I’m very sorry about your brother,’ said Laura, to whom Binnie bade a tearful farewell.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Binnie, with a giggle which contrasted oddly with her tears. ‘Now I can get married to Bernie in peace. There never would have been any peace while Florian was alive, you know.’

‘So Opal is completely mad,’ said Laura, when Binnie had gone.

‘Or a dedicated artist,’ said Dame Beatrice. The last word lay with Grandmother Rebekah Rose. ’

‘So is this beautiful Florian songs of songs, which is Solomon,’ she pronounced.

‘Only one Song, darling,’ protested Bernardo.

‘I am thinking,’ said Rebekah, with dignity, ‘of English version, Authorised.’

‘“Solomon had a vineyard at Baalhamon,”’ quoted Bernardo solemnly.

‘“He let out the vineyard unto keepers.” More than you’d do, sweetheart, isn’t it? You wouldn’t trust the keepers not to sell the grapes on their own account.’

‘I,’ said his grandmother, ‘am not having vineyards. All those foreign workers with dirty feet!’

‘Done by machinery nowadays.’

‘You are not forgetting my little brooch of a ram with diamonds?’

‘You are not forgetting the wedding present you promised me?’

‘No promises! I am not promising nothing!’

‘Splendid! I like these double negatives.’

‘Double negatives makes a phooey photograph,’ said Rebekah. ‘So is this Florian. No smile, he is an angel. Smile, he is a devil.’

‘Smile and smile, and be a villain,’ said Bernardo. ‘Well, what *are* you going to give me?’

‘To be married in C. of E.?’

‘No, in the Dutch Reformed Church, Grandmamma, as I told you.’

‘I buy you a very nice buttonhole,’ said Rebekah.

—«»—«»—«»—

[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

[A 3S Release— v1, html]

[October 03, 2006]